

New parents left unprepared due to UK Government health failures, report warns

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Mothers and fathers left unprepared for parenthood by government health failures. Credit: University of Southampton

Expectant mothers and fathers are being failed by the UK Government's outdated public health plans leaving them unprepared for parenthood, a

new report has warned.

The review by Children's Alliance, with the University of Southampton, found that women and men are unaware of how poor personal health can impact their babies' early development—with many overweight and still smoking or drinking at the start of pregnancy.

Findings also show that [public health messages](#) about preparing for pregnancy and protecting infants before birth are often overlooked by frontline professionals and not taught by the national school curriculum.

The report's authors are now calling for preconception care in the UK—which supports women prior to pregnancy and parenthood—to be included at all stages of the Government's health strategy.

Lead author Helen Clark from Children's Alliance said fixing preconception care would leave a worthy legacy for whichever political party puts it in their election manifesto.

She added, "Studies have shown us that parents who practice [good health](#) prior to and in pregnancy give their children the best start to life and are more likely to be healthier growing up. Ill health costs money and, as we saw recently from the Office for National Statistics, 2.5 million people are not working due to [health problems](#).

"Throwing money at outdated public health policies won't work. Improving preconception care is the smart 21st century approach the NHS should take—indeed a revolution that will cut future waiting lists and won't break the bank either."

The new Preconception Care Strategy was jointly created by Children's Alliance together with [health professionals](#) and academics at several UK universities, including Southampton, to improve life chances for

children.

Data highlighted in the study revealed mass inequalities among wealthy and disadvantaged families alike—with 24% of stillbirths attributable to socioeconomic deprivation.

As many as nine out of 10 women in England enter pregnancy with at least one indicator that risks the health of the child, while only 27% of mothers take folic acid before conceiving. Other results showed:

- Women from Black ethnic background in England are one-and-a-half-times more likely to enter pregnancy with obesity compared with white women,
- People from [low-income families](#) are three times more likely to smoke at the time of conception,
- Women living in deprived areas are nearly two times more likely to have a pre-existing mental health condition.

University of Southampton Professor Keith Godfrey, from the National Institute for Health Research Southampton Biomedical Research Centre, was a lead contributor to the report and said, "A child's first 1,000 days is integral to their lifelong physical and mental health, development and resilience."

"Preparation for parenthood is crucial for leveling up opportunities for children and can help tackle disparities in their health. However, preconception care remains undervalued in the UK and the Government's health policies have either failed to help people of reproductive age or are too late for women entering maternity care."

The report's authors have published a five-point action plan for government and [health officials](#) to improve the health of expectant parents.

Five-point action plan:

The authors have published an action plan for government officials to improve the health of expectant parents—it includes:

1. Make preconception care services available to everyone in the UK—to tackle spiraling inequality,
2. Incentivize GPs, maternity services and family hubs to normalize preconception care—to improve [pregnancy](#) and post-natal care,
3. Add preconception care to the curriculum to teach pupils the importance of healthy pregnancies,
4. Move preconception healthcare into related health policies that address obesity and weight management, alcohol and smoking,
5. Encourage large organizations—including the NHS—to give staff access to medical or health and well-being professionals before conception.

More information: The report is titled "The Preconception Care Strategy."

Provided by University of Southampton

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