

COVID -19 and Mental Issues in Pregnancy and Postpartum

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ABSTRACT

The medical science is yet to get over the current COVID-19 pandemic in terms of understanding pathogenesis, diagnostics and treatment options. We currently hope for flattening of the infection trajectory and long term complication especially on mental health in current scenario is a forlorn hope. There is a fundamental need to integrate screening for anxiety and depression in existing antenatal programs to provide proper support to pregnant women in the developing nations. It calls for emphasis on screening, counseling services to pregnant mother to deal with secondary mental health challenges related with COVID-19. The short communication is an endeavor to sensitize readers with mental health issues related to pregnancy and post partum period in COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Pregnancy; COVID-19; Mental health

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INTRODUCTION

Pregnancy can be an exciting time, but also full of uncertainty. Health can be defined as a state of physical, mental, social and financial wellbeing and not merely absence of disease or infirmity. Positive mental health is of paramount importance during pregnancy and postpartum. A pregnant state is consistently associated with depression, concern and anxiety resulting in impact on the growth of the fetus in the form of small for gestational age, low birth weight, and preterm delivery. Postpartum depression is also a known and recognized entity proving as a reason of poor maternal-fetus bond. The COVID-19 pandemic understandably adds further stress and may cause anxiety. It is thus a matter of priority to address the concerns and ensure positive mental health and well being of both mother and child.^[1]

Pregnancy and COVID

Pre-pandemic, about 15% of pregnant women dealt with mental health issues during the perinatal period, now the figure has increased to 41%.^[1] The statistics are worrying but not surprising. These are testing times for the entire world.

During pregnancy, signs and symptoms of high stress include:^[2]

- Changes in appetite.
- Frequent feelings of fear and worry about the pregnancy and delivery.
- Poor quality sleep, restless.
- Problems concentrating, easily annoyed or irritable.

The pandemic of COVID -19 brings with it plethora of distress [1] in the form of getting anxious about infection, feeling sad or angry because of isolation or not able to meet with family and friends. The social discontent makes the pregnant women feel nervous, anxious and on the edge. The fear of getting infected in spite of taking precautions results in distress.

Pandemic related worries^[3]

The pandemic related concerns are being posed by the women during pregnancy. Each practicing obstetrician is mobbed by questionnaires which are difficult to answer conclusively because of the uncertain behavior of the corona virus infection. The pregnant women concerns are many fold compared to general population and the questions at times unending. To highlight a few-

- What will be the impact on my unborn baby?
- How do I prevent myself from being affected with corona virus?
- Is excessive use of sanitizer safe during pregnancy?
- How often do I get tested for COVID?
- Should I lead a life of isolation throughout pregnancy?
- Will my relatives or husband be allowed to stay with me during delivery and later?
- Risk of transmission to baby if I get infected?
- Is breast feeding safe?
- Will transportation be available when I go in labor?

Obstetricians are now pushed into the shoes of a close associate, an expert to even a psychiatric aide for the mental health of the pregnant lady.

Pregnant women may wish to try the following stress-relieving practices and tips:^[4]

- Refrain from looking at physical media or watching the news around the clock. Instead, limit the news to key times of the day, such as the morning or before dinner, leaving the evenings free for unwinding and promoting sleep.
- Ask a doctor or midwife about online antenatal classes, which are excellent places to meet and talk to other pregnant women.
- Try meditating, deep breathing, or gentle stretching.

- Take care of key relationships by connecting with friends and family over the phone or through video conferences.
- Get enough sleep by going to bed at a consistent time and limiting
- Get enough sleep by going to bed at a consistent time and limiting screen time beforehand.
- Maintain a healthful diet and engage in regular exercise. Eating well and staying active can help the body stay healthy in times of mental ill health.
- Take up a new hobby or rediscover an old one, such as playing an instrument, learning a language, or reading. People may also enjoy making blankets, clothes, or handmade toys for the coming baby, or decorating a nursery.
- Make use of online support groups and forums for pregnant women and new parents.
- Consider online counseling. Therapy can be helpful for anyone experiencing anxiety, depression, or stress.
- Ask for extra help - this may mean that a partner takes a greater share of caring for the children, if applicable, or that a neighbor does the grocery shopping and drops the bags outside the door.

Recommendations for pregnant women ^[1,5]

Besides the physical health, optimal mental attitude is of prime importance for the growth and development of the baby. Anxiety about the Covid-19 infection is normal at the time of pandemic. Attempts should be made to minimize watching, reading or listening to distressing news concerning COVID. But it's important to keep vigil of the norms and new updates from reliable sources.

- Practice hand hygiene frequently. It's preferable to use soap and water and use sanitizers only when moving out of home.
- Practice social distancing and work from home rather than going to place of work.
- Keep contact with minimal people or only those at home. All members to practice infection control.
- Maintain adequate & balance diet and supplements like Iron, Calcium, Vit D and Vit C as recommended by doctor.
- Better to seek online consultation to minimize exposure. Contact numbers of ASHA, JPNH, ANM or obstetricians, emergency ambulance should be kept handy.
- Follow the obstetricians' instructions regarding visits.
- Never stop any medication concerning mental health without consulting the psychiatrist or the concerned doctor.

When to quarantine ^[3]

If a pregnant woman has symptoms that resemble those of COVID-19, such as coughing, fever, or shortness of breath, she should call a doctor. The doctor can make recommendations about whether or not COVID-19 testing is necessary. If the woman's symptoms are mild, a doctor will likely recommend that she self-isolate at home. Home treatment includes taking acetaminophen for fever relief, resting, and drinking plenty of water. A high fever or difficulty breathing are signs that urgent care is necessary. Try to call the hospital before arriving at the emergency room so that they can take any necessary precautions.

Postpartum care ^[3]

The new mothers should be encouraged to breast feed. By the available data, human breast milk does not contain corona virus even if the mother had COVID -19. The benefits of breast milk outweigh the risks of transmission of the virus through breast milk. However the COVID positive mother should wear a N-95 mask and practice hand washing prior to breast feeding .Avoid coughing or sneezing on the baby. The proper immunization of the baby should be encouraged.

Role of partner or family

The support of husband and family members is important for the pregnant women. Preparation for an emergency hospital visit should be discussed by them.

CONCLUSION

Pregnant women may feel additional stress, anxiety, or depression during the COVID-19 pandemic. But even if they are self-isolating, they do not have to face these problems alone. It is best for pregnant women to focus on the elements that they can control, including self-care and physical distancing .Keeping in regular contact with a doctor or midwife can also help alleviate worries about health and the birth.

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