How COVID-19 Affects Women During and After Pregnancy

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

How COVID-19 Affects Women During and After Pregnancy

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected how women experience pregnancy and the postpartum period. A literature review was conducted to determine how COVID-19 affected the wellbeing and mental health of women in the United States who were pregnant in 2020 or 2021. This literature review focused on effects of COVID-19 on the general population in the U.S.; how pregnant women perceive effects of COVID-19; how pregnancy effects the mental health of women; and how these women are screened for postpartum depression and other adverse conditions or effects. Findings showed that the incidence of mental health issues in the U.S. increased significantly in 2020, and that pregnant women reported increased stress and difficulties during pregnancy due to factors caused by COVID-19. To successfully assess pregnant and postpartum women for postpartum depression and other negative effects brought by COVID-19, women should be routinely screened using a standardized postpartum depression screening tool that includes additional statements related to adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.
How COVID-19 Affects Women During and After Pregnancy: A Literature Review

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Northern Illinois University School of Nursing

April 25, 2021
Introduction

COVID-19 caused changes in every area and stage of life in 2020 and continues to change patterns of life today. A stage of life that causes significant changes for many women is pregnancy and motherhood. Their priorities, bodies, lifestyles, and more are altered within the span of nine months. As COVID-19 changed much of the way people live, it has also changed how many women experience this part of their life. The changes in way of life caused by COVID-19 have negatively affected the lives of many. This literature review analyzes mental health prevalence in the United States (U. S.), mental health in pregnancy, and how COVID-19 affects pregnancy and mental health of pregnant women.

Analysis

COVID-19 has affected mental health throughout the population since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to McKnight-Eily et al., responses to a survey conducted through their study show that during April and May of 2020, U. S. adults often reported substance use and mental health conditions (2021). The prevalence of depression in U.S. adults also seemed to increase significantly: their report found that 28.5% of U.S. adults reported experiencing depression compared to a national survey completed in 2019 that found this number to be around 7.0% (McKnight-Eily et al., 2021). This data shows the issue of increasing mental health conditions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to current health disparities, this trend may disproportionately affect minority groups, as they often receive less treatment for mental health conditions (McKnight-Eily et al., 2021). As mental health conditions increase in the general population, it is important to examine how this affects women during a time when they are already at risk: pregnancy and postpartum.
Both the actual and perceived effects of COVID-19 have affected the prenatal, perinatal, and postnatal periods for women. Studies conducted over the last year show how COVID-19 affects or is perceived to affect pregnant women and neonates. According to Moreno et al., in a study assessing vertical transmission of COVID-19 during the third trimester of pregnancy no neonates tested positive for the virus (2020). This study did show a correlation between preterm birth and patients with COVID-19: the rate of this in the study was significantly higher than the average rate in the U. S. (Moreno et al., 2020). Whether this is a result of COVID-19 remains unknown. According to a study by Robaina-Castellanos and de la Caridad Riesgo-Rodriguez, “congenital and intrapartum COVID-19 infection in the fetus/newborn is possible but rare” (2021). Though transmission from mother to fetus/newborn is rare, when pregnant women do experience severe COVID-19 infection and symptoms, it increases the risk of severe pregnancy complications (Derosa, 2020). Information about risk of transmission is not widely known, and many women perceive the effects of COVID-19 on their baby to be much more severe, causing increased distress. According to a study conducted by Sharifi-Heris, “the perceived risk of COVID-19 is a largely significant indication of stress, anxiety, and depression” in pregnant women (2021). It is important that pregnant women receive information related to current findings about COVID-19 so that they are informed about true risk to themselves and their baby.

Due to the many changes caused by the perinatal period and COVID-19, many women experienced increased stress and other mental health effects. A mixed-methods study by Barbosa-Leiker et al. assessed coping behaviors, stress, and resources utilized and needed during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study found that many factors contributed to increased stress and problems for pregnant and postpartum women during this time, including missing prenatal appointments, difficulty with financials, access to health care, and needed supplies, and concern
related to possible newborn infection with COVID-19, lack of social support and family and friend participation, and more (Barbosa-Leiker et al., 2021). These results exemplify how the COVID-19 pandemic has created further stress and difficulty for many pregnant women throughout the U. S. and why it is important that steps are taken to aid these women during this time.

Postpartum depression is a significant adverse condition that must be assessed for in pregnant and postpartum women. According to Morehead, 10% to 20% of women experience postpartum depression within the first year after giving birth (2020). It is estimated that this number is higher due to underreporting. Women are typically screened for postpartum depression during pregnancy as well as in the immediate postpartum period. It is recommended that women are screened at well child visits in addition to their own appointments, as many women miss the initial postpartum checkup and may be missed (Morehead, 2020). This shows the importance of screening for and recognizing postpartum depression when seeing women in the hospital or clinic in order to diagnose the condition and help the women during this time.

To aid in assessing risk for postpartum depression, screening tools are used. A popular screening tool used for postpartum depression is the Edinburg Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS). This tool screens for both anxiety and depression, is short and simple, and written at a low level of health literacy (Morehead, 2020). It consists of ten questions that ask how the client has felt within the past seven days. Questions assess for characteristics such as feeling anxious, worried, overwhelmed, and unhappy without reason and for thoughts of self-harm. Answers to these questions are then scored, which indicates risk for possible postpartum depression. Screening for these conditions is even more important when considering the effects of the
COVID-19 pandemic on mental health. It is not only necessary to screen women for postpartum depression, but also to provide follow-up and resources to aid in management of this.

**Recommendations for Screening**

As COVID-19 has brought multiple new concerns for women before, during, and after pregnancy, it is important that nurses and other health care professionals assess for issues occurring in or due to these areas in addition to postpartum depression. To assess for other feelings related to depression and anxiety as well as possible contributors to these feelings, additional questions should be asked in addition to the EPDS during screening. A short section with questions related to COVID-19 effects should be added and may include assessment statements such as:

1. I have felt lonely or isolated
2. I have felt worried about lack of support after having my baby
3. I have felt worried about the health of my baby
4. I have had trouble affording things for my baby and myself
5. I was unable to attend prenatal visits during my pregnancy

These questions assess for: experiences of social isolation or lack of social support; knowledge related to COVID-19 and newborns; financial difficulty; and compliance or ability to comply with care. Answers to these statements will help health care professionals determine how COVID-19 may have affected the overall health and pregnancy experience of women, and better allow them to connect these women with helpful resources to assist them during this time.

Adding five additional statements allows nurses to learn more about the feelings their clients may have while also keeping the screening tool short and simple to encourage honest
completion. As situations in health care change, it is important that health care professionals adapt to provide the best quality and safest care for their patients.

**Conclusion**

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented changes and effects for people throughout the U. S. and the world. Perinatal and postpartum women are at significant risk for increased mental health issues without considering COVID-19. Adding this consideration only increases their risk and potential for difficulty during the perinatal and postpartum periods. Health care professionals must take action to screen these women for conditions such as postpartum depression, anxiety, lack of resources, and more to help aid in reducing the negative effects experienced by these women during this time. This action would increase safety for both the mother and baby and promote mental health in this population.
References


How COVID-19 Affects Women During and After Pregnancy
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Introduction
- COVID-19 caused changes in every area and stage of life in 2020 and continues to change patterns of life today; a stage of life that causes significant changes for many women is pregnancy and motherhood.
- Women experiencing pregnancy and the postpartum period need a lot of support from family, friends, and others as they adjust to the many changes they experience.
- Due to COVID-19 regulations and distancing rules, new mothers are forced to choose between receiving support and risking the health of their newborn and themselves.
- It is necessary that the effects of COVID-19 on these women are found and acknowledged.

Methodology
- To research information for this project, a literature review was conducted using Northern Illinois University’s library databases.
- The primary database used in this search was CINAHL. The search included articles published between 2020-2021 with the full text available.
- The goal of this search was to find articles discussing the following main topics:
  - Effects of COVID-19 on the general population in the U.S.
  - How pregnant women perceive effects of COVID-19
  - How pregnancy effects the mental health of women and how they are screened

Results
- The prevalence of substance use and mental health conditions increased significantly during 2020 compared to 2019 in the U.S. (McKnight-Eily et al., 2021).
- Vertical transmission of COVID-19 is shown to be possible but rare (Robaina-Castellanos & de la Caridad Riesgo-Rodriguez, 2021).
- Many pregnant women reported experiencing increased stress, anxiety, and depression due to worry about COVID-19 and possible effects on their baby (Sharifi-Heris, 2021).
- A common screening tool used to assess for postpartum depression is the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS).
- Recommended questions to add to screening include:
  - I have felt lonely or isolated
  - I have felt worried about lack of support after having my baby
  - I have felt worried about the health of my baby
  - I have had trouble affording things for my baby and myself
  - I was unable to attend prenatal visits during my pregnancy

Conclusions
- Perinatal and postpartum women are at a significant risk for increased mental health conditions, even before considering the effects of COVID-19.
- Health care professionals must take action to screen these women in order to promote safety for the mother and baby as well as promote mental health in this population.
- Additional questions should be added to screening questionnaires to further assess the overall health and pregnancy experience of these women related to COVID-19 and to determine resources they may need.

Bibliography