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Reviewed June 2021

Clinical briefing: Public Health and COVID-19

Potential impact of COVID in this topic area

- Public health is about helping people to stay healthy and protecting them from threats to their health.
- During the current pandemic it is important to remain vigilant around maintaining public health messages

Current key guidance for this topic

Smoking

[Evidence](#) gathered to date indicates that people who smoke are at much higher risk of becoming seriously unwell if they contract COVID-19. It is therefore particularly important to support women and their households to stop smoking.

Quitting smoking in pregnancy can make a significant difference to birth outcomes, reducing the risk of stillbirth, low birth weight and sudden infant death. Women should be reminded of the risks and have easy access to specialist support to quit and timely provision of nicotine replacement therapy.

Some stop smoking support services have changed during the pandemic and carbon monoxide (CO) monitoring was paused. This is being resumed across the UK and it is now recommended that all pregnant women be offered CO monitoring, as part of their routine antenatal care and in line with NICE guidance and the Saving Babies Lives Care Bundle.

Work by Public Health England, NHS England and NHS Improvement has explored the potential risk from CO monitoring and COVID-19 transmission





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and found it to be minimal. PHE therefore recommends that maternity services resume CO monitoring at in person appointments, where it is safe to do so.

Midwives are advised to adhere to their monitor manufacturers' latest guidance on safe use of products, including the regular cleaning of monitors, replacement of consumables and the use of relevant PPE. CO monitoring is not classified as an aerosol generating procedure (AGP). Updated training resources on reintroduction of CO monitoring are available via e-Learning for Healthcare (link below).

Monitoring should be carried out with a minimum of 2 metres distance between midwife and woman, with her facing away and the room should be well ventilated. The woman should dispose of the mouthpiece into the bin herself and immediately wash her hands or use hand sanitiser.

Prior to resuming CO monitoring, a risk assessment should be carried out with input from the RCM's Health and Safety or Workplace Representatives. Guidance on carrying out a risk assessment can be found [here](#).

The RCM believes that specialist stop-smoking support services must be available to pregnant women, if CO monitoring is to be meaningful and effective.

Resources

E-Learning for Healthcare [Reintroduction of CO Testing in Maternity and Health Visiting Services](#)

Ilearn: Refresh your 'Very Brief Advice' technique on smoking in pregnancy: <https://www.ilearn.rcm.org.uk/course/info.php?id=259>

RCM Briefing on CO monitoring risk assessment: <https://www.rcm.org.uk/media/4661/clinical-briefing-carbon-monoxide-monitoring.pdf>

NHS guidance on quitting smoking <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/quit-smoking/?tabname=advice-and-support>





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NHS guidance on smoking during pregnancy

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/smoking-pregnant/>

Financial hardship and social inclusion

COVID-19 has triggered changes to employment that could cause financial hardship. Support and advice can be found from the UK government and 3rd sector agencies.

Resources

Citizens Advice on COVID

<https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/health/coronavirus-what-it-means-for-you/>

Government assistance for vulnerable individuals

<https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus-extremely-vulnerable> Maternity Action advice on employment rights for pregnant women

<https://maternityaction.org.uk/adviceline> Shelter advice for people facing urgent housing issues <https://england.shelter.org.uk/>

Trussell Trust advice on emergency assistance getting food

<https://www.trusselltrust.org/get-help/emergency-food/> UK government guidance for those affected by COVID-19

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/support-for-those-affected-by-covid-19/support-for-those-affected-by-covid-19>

Domestic Abuse

Measures to control the spread of COVID-19 which brought about social distancing and isolation meant some people were more vulnerable to domestic abuse. Agencies are reporting a rise in incidents linked with COVID-19 and extra vigilance is therefore necessary, especially where in person visits are reduced or undertaken virtually. It is vitally important that midwives are responsive to requests for confidential advice. Consider precautionary measures for families with known risk factors.

Resources

RCM i-learn Domestic abuse

<https://www.ilearn.rcm.org.uk/course/info.php?id=633>





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TUC domestic abuse and coronavirus learning tool

<https://learning.elucidat.com/course/5e875ae4d0715-5e8c6417dfc28>

Women's Aid COVID resource hub <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/covid-19-resource-hub/>

Getting help:

National Domestic Abuse Helpline 0808 2000 247 or online contact form

<https://www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk/Contact-us>

National LGBT+ Domestic Abuse Helpline – 0800 999 5428

Rape Crisis services - 0808 802 9999 <https://rapecrisis.org.uk/> – or webchat

<https://rapecrisis.org.uk/get-help/live-chat-helpline/>

Women's Aid webchat [Available Monday 10am -12pm]

Nations specific:

Northern Ireland 24-hour helpline: 0808 802 1414 Northern Ireland

<https://www.womensaidni.org/> Scotland 24-hour helpline: 0800 027 1234;

Scottish women's aid <https://womensaid.scot/>

Wales 24-hour helpline 0808 80 10 800: Welsh women's aid

<https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk>

Infant feeding

There is currently no clinical evidence to suggest that the virus can be transmitted through breastmilk. Infection can be spread to the baby in the same way as to anyone in close contact with you. The benefits of breastfeeding outweigh any potential risks of transmission of the virus through breastmilk or the mother being in close contact with the baby. However, this is an individual decision and can be discussed between the woman and her midwife, health visitor or GP.

If parents have COVID-19, the following practical advice may be useful:

- Washing hands thoroughly before and after contact with the baby
- Routinely cleaning and disinfecting any surfaces touched





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- Thoroughly washing with hot, soapy water and sterilising any infant feeding equipment, including breast pumps, bottles and teats, before and after use
- Practising respiratory hygiene, including during feeding, for example by avoiding coughing or sneezing on the baby and by wearing a fluid-resistant face mask
- Parents should take care to avoid falling asleep with their baby, see UNICEFs Co-sleeping and SIDS guidance
- If a breastfeeding mother is feeling unwell, continuing to breastfeed rather than expressing may be easier and less stressful during this time. Alternatively, she may prefer for someone who is well to feed expressed breastmilk to the baby
- If the mother is too unwell to breastfeed or express breastmilk, she may be supported to re-lactate once well enough. Consider using donor milk if available and applicable
- The JCVI advises that there is no known risk in giving COVID-19 vaccines to breastfeeding women should therefore be offered vaccination if they are otherwise eligible. Women should be advised that there is lack of safety data for these vaccinations in breastfeeding. For further information, see JCVI advice.

Resources

Breastfeeding network <https://www.breastfeedingnetwork.org.uk/>

<https://www.unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly/infant-feeding-during-the-covid-19-outbreak/>

National Breastfeeding Helpline 0300 100 0212 from 9:30am to 9:30pm, 7 days a week. Live online support via web chat: Live Chat

NHS guidance on breastfeeding

<https://www.nhs.uk/start4life/baby/breastfeeding/>

NHS guidance on express and bottle feeding

<https://www.nhs.uk/start4life/baby/breastfeeding/expressing-and-bottlefeeding/>

Parents club Scotland <https://www.parentclub.scot/>





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RCM Academic Rapid Review Optimising mother baby contact and infant feeding in a pandemic

Exercise

Exercise in pregnancy is vitally important to maintaining a healthy weight, good circulation and mental wellbeing. Many exercise routines are safe and suitable at home, such as yoga, if a woman is required to stay at home. Encourage women to take regular, moderately strenuous exercise. Consider sharing tips and suggestions when running antenatal classes, either virtually or in person. Exercising outside is known to be of particular benefit in relation to boosting mental wellbeing. Fresh, circulating air reduces the risk of transmission of the virus between people, and so exercising outside with others may be a positive support for both physical and mental health in pregnancy and in summer months to boost vitamin D levels.

Resources

NHS guidance on exercise during pregnancy

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/pregnancy-exercise/>

Tommy's guidance on exercise during pregnancy

<https://www.tommys.org/pregnancy-information/impregnant/exercise-pregnancy/exercise-faqs/it-safe-exercise-pregnancy>

Nutrition

A balanced diet is important. Cereals, wholegrains and natural yogurt can provide essential fibre, vitamins and minerals.

Vitamin D supplementation is recommended to all women during pregnancy as it can help reduce the risk of respiratory infections. There have been some reports that people with low levels of vitamin D are at an increased risk of serious respiratory complications if they develop coronavirus. However, there is insufficient evidence to show that taking vitamin D prevents COVID-19 infection or is an effective treatment.

Most people living in northern hemispheres will have low levels of vitamin D and women from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds with melanin pigmented (dark) skin, may be particularly at risk of low levels of vitamin D.





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We advise all pregnant women to consider taking 10 micrograms of vitamin D a day to keep bones and muscles healthy. Vitamin D supplements are available from most pharmacies, supermarkets and other retailers.

For families that qualify, signpost to Healthy Start for vitamin supplements and additional financial support.

Resources

Healthy Start UK <https://www.healthystart.nhs.uk/>
Government assistance for vulnerable individuals
<https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus-extremely-vulnerable>

NHS guidance on pregnancy and diet
<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/healthy-pregnancy-diet/>
NHS guidance on healthy eating in pregnancy
<https://www.nhs.uk/start4life/pregnancy/healthy-eating-pregnancy/>

Infection control

All women should be provided with information about how to reduce their risk of contracting COVID-19 through careful, frequent and thorough handwashing; the use of face coverings in enclosed public spaces and social distancing. Women should be encouraged to have the flu and pertussis vaccinations during pregnancy.

Resources

COVID prevention and control
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/wuhannovel->
NHS guidance on COVID infection control
<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>
NHS general guidance on infection control <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-body/how-to-prevent-germs-fromspreading/>

References and current evidence base

Health Protection Scotland <https://www.hps.scot.nhs.uk/>





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Public Health Agency Northern Ireland

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/news/covid-19-coronavirus>

Public Health England <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/public-health-england>

Public Health Wales <https://phw.nhs.wales/topics/latest-information-on-novel-coronavirus-covid-19/>

