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New parents experience increased mental health strain during COVID-19 lockdown

A study by a team of University of Cape Town (UCT) researchers found that the COVID-19 lockdown placed added strain on new parents' mental health and symptoms of depression were very common.

Published in peer-reviewed journal, *Women and Birth*, the study explored the birth and new parenting experiences of South African parents during lockdown.

The all-female research team, made up of a lactation consultant, Emma Numanoglu, health systems researcher, Amanda Edwards and epidemiologists Dr Tammy Phillips and Dr Elise Farley, conducted a cross-sectional online survey with consenting parents of babies born in 2020. Most of the 520 respondents were females (496, 95%) who gave birth at private hospitals (426, 86%). Factors associated with negative birth emotions and probable depression were estimated using logistic regression.

The findings showed that parents with children born under lockdown were less likely to have their preferred choice of birth method, had worse self-reported birth experiences, were less likely to have skin-to-skin contact with their babies after birth and were frequently unable to have someone at their birth that they had wanted to be there.

"Women who delivered during lockdown were more likely to have negative birth experiences than those who delivered pre-lockdown and the lockdown clearly exacerbated the usual challenges of birth and new parenting" said Phillips, senior lecturer at UCT's Division of Epidemiology & Biostatistics.

Phillips shared: "In our study the prevalence of probable depression (63% mothers, 29% fathers), was higher than usual in this context (33%), and much higher than worldwide pre-COVID-19 estimates (13%)."

"Our study showed that mothers who had predominantly negative emotions about their birth were more likely to be depressed, and that having a preterm baby, not having the delivery method of your choice and COVID-19 affecting your birth experience led to more negative feelings about the birth. Parents need support to overcome these

challenges. Digital methods of care provision during the post-partum period are effective.”

Lockdown has been reported to cause difficulties during the birth and new parenting phase including changes in delivery plan, a lack of breastfeeding support, difficulty accessing maternal healthcare, mental health challenges and a lack of social support.

Phillips said mothers reported that lockdown restrictions made the new parenting phase more challenging.

“In particular there was the ban on the sale of baby products which was introduced with Level 5 lockdown and only overturned after the restriction was ruled unconstitutional in early April 2020. A further challenge was the registration of babies, which by law should happen within 30 days of their birth.

Prior to lockdown, registrations took place within hospitals, this was cancelled during lockdown, as were many services at Home Affairs, making registration difficult,” said Phillips.

According to the study, the ban on exercise, a feature of several lockdown levels, was noted by respondents as something that impacted their postpartum quality of life.

Exercise in the postpartum period has been linked to several positive changes for the mother including improved psychosocial well-being in other settings. Future lockdown restriction implementers and policy makers should take these challenges into consideration. Baby products should always be included in essential items lists, and be available for sale in shops and online; plans should be made to assist new parents to register their babies in a timely manner and outdoor exercise, with precautions such as masks, should be allowed.

The study also found a high caesarean section rate (63%). While undoubtedly lifesaving, the researchers discuss how caesarean sections can lead to severe and permanent physical complications, increased post-traumatic stress, mental health issues and impairments in quality of life for the mother.

Phillips shared: “Caesarean sections have also been reported to lead to challenges with infant-mother bonding, breastfeeding issues, an increase risk of non-communicable diseases and adverse effects on children’s sensory perception and neuropsychiatric development.

“Our findings show that most mothers wanted to have a natural birth, and that a change in delivery method was directly associated with a negative birth experience which was associated with probable depression. Due to these potential issues, caesarean sections should only be used when medically necessary.”

She said the problematically high caesarean section rate in South African private health care needs to be addressed.

The article can be accessed free of charge until 30 October 2021 using this [link](#). More information on the study can be found: <https://www.lockdownbabies.co.za/>

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