



## Statement World Health Day 2020: Research is needed to better understand the impact of COVID19 on maternal mental health

**Brussels, April 7<sup>th</sup> 2020** - On World Health Day 2020, the multidisciplinary EU-funded network of researchers and professionals on perinatal mental health, **COST Action Riseup-PPD**, raises awareness of the impact of COVID-19 on maternal mental health.

### *Changes in maternal care due to COVID-19*

In light of the unprecedented crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, protocols for prenatal care and childbirth have been changing all over Europe. In the interests of safety, new practices are being adopted by perinatal health care services that seem to contrast with respectful and supported birth and postpartum period, negatively impacting new mothers' mental health and consequently their newborn. For instance, some countries are banning partners from accompanying women to the hospital and being present during labour, imposing restrictions on postnatal visits and separating women from their newborn.

To date, no clear evidence suggests that pregnant women are at a greater risk from COVID-19 than any other healthy individual or that they will pass the virus to their fetus or baby during pregnancy or delivery<sup>1</sup>. Besides strict adherence to the generic health precautions that apply to the general population, several other changes have been implemented to respond to the crisis. In low-risk pregnancies, outpatient consultations can be conducted via video conferencing where feasible. There are evident efforts to minimize waiting room exposure for scheduled ultrasound appointments and lab tests; these may include patients attending appointments alone and waiting outside in their own vehicle to reduce the overall risk of transmission. In many countries, visitor restrictions have been implemented in maternity wards, limiting visits to one birthing partner, or – in some cases – instituting a visitor restriction policy for labour and delivery services.

On the other hand, laboring mothers who are infected are placed in isolation, to avoid spreading the virus in maternity wards. In addition, birth via C-sections may be recommended for infected women, as vaginal delivery may be difficult for mothers who have trouble breathing. These measures may be necessary, as several countries are dealing with an unprecedented public health crisis and their healthcare systems have been badly hit by the pandemic.

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<sup>1</sup> WHO, 2020; Luo & Yin, 2020



### ***Negative impact of COVID-19 in maternal mental health***

The COVID-19 epidemic is causing fear, anxiety and depression in the population. At the same time, a growing body of research shows that pregnancy and postpartum constitute a period of increased risk for mental health problems. It is estimated that 1 in 5 women will develop a mental illness in the perinatal period<sup>2</sup>. Perinatal depression is the most common mental illness experienced during pregnancy and postpartum and carries long-lasting adverse effects on women and their babies, putting a strong burden on their families and society as a whole.

Evidence coming in from past epidemic infections, highlights the importance of examining mental health in light of stressful events experienced during pregnancy and the postpartum period. Studies conducted with Brazilian women facing ZIKV infection (Zika virus) demonstrated that symptoms of depression in the immediate postpartum period were associated with the clinical diagnosis of the disorder (Moraes et al., 2019). Importantly, levels of anxiety and depression remain higher in these mothers during the first post-partum year (dos Santos Oliveira, 2017), suggesting the need for long-term support for these mothers. Moreover, a multi-centered study in China showed an increase in the prevalence of PND and anxiety after the announcement of the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak (Wu et al., 2020).

### ***Task force “Perinatal mental health and COVID19 epidemic”***

Given the aforementioned reasons, it is more important than ever during these uncertain times, to promote perinatal mental health. Riseup-PPD has a key role in supporting activities aimed at mitigating the negative consequences of these experiences for women's mental health. Therefore, we have decided to create a new Task Force “Perinatal Mental Health and COVID-19 epidemic” in order to promote best practices in maternal mental health that may mitigate the impact of COVID-19 management in women's mental health. This cross-cutting Task Force aims to:

- 1) Identify documents, protocols and policies from different countries concerning provision of safe care and mental health in delivery and the postpartum in the face of COVID-19, in collaboration with the EU-funded research network on perinatal mental health **Devotion**;
- 2) Collect and select best practices that could contribute to reduce the negative impact of COVID-19 safety measures in health facilities and promote mental health support to pregnant women, new mothers and their families’;
- 3) Involve scientific and professional societies from different fields at national and international level;

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<sup>2</sup> Hahn-Holbrook et al. 2018; Shorey et al., 2018



- 4) Support the development of research activities aimed at evaluating and promoting women's needs in terms of mental health practices and health care services;
- 5) Support the development of research activities aimed at evaluating the impact of these practices on the quality of parenting and child developmental outcomes.

### ***What can be done?***

Drawing on lessons learned from previous epidemics (Tucci, 2017), the COVID-19 crisis can be profoundly upsetting for pregnant women and new mothers. It is essential in these uncertain times that women during pregnancy and following childbirth are able to access the support and care they and their families need. Online resources are also effective to promote wellbeing and prevent stress, depression and anxiety in the perinatal period (Lee et al., 2016). Many health professionals have been working on developing online courses and creating a helpline for parenting education, breastfeeding support and pain management in labour.

Affordable, accessible, respectful and quality maternal health care varies greatly between countries. We call on health professionals to **follow official recommendations issued so far such as the ones from WHO** in order to promote **evidence-based care as well as ensuring that they have the resources they need to perform their essential care work**. We also suggest further research in the field of perinatal mental health as suggested by the WHO. It is also important to look into developing European-wide awareness-raising initiatives and guidelines on respectful care during childbirth which acknowledges the link between mental and physical health, and respects human rights including the right of all mothers and their families to access appropriate and quality care and support.

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## Notes to editors

Experience of postpartum depression may take the form of feelings of extreme sadness, anxiety, and exhaustion that may make it difficult for women to complete daily care activities for themselves and/or for others including the baby.

## About Riseup-PPD

The Research Innovation and Sustainable Pan-European Network in Peripartum Depression Disorder - Riseup-PPD - is an EU funded research network of professionals from different fields (medicine, psychology, neuroscience, midwifery social work, economy, engineer, ethics, mathematics, biostatistics, epidemiology, history, among others) coordinated by the University of Coimbra (Portugal), and currently involving 28 European countries and beyond which was established in April 2019 for a duration of 4 years. It aims at filling gaps in Peripartum Depression Disorder research, practice and social awareness by developing updated reviews fostering research efforts on the standardization of diagnostic criteria, the development of adequate screening tools and cost-effectiveness evaluation of prevention and treatment programs. <https://riseupppd18138.wordpress.com/>