

# What was the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on postnatal depression?

September 2023

Siân Harrison, Maria Quigley, Gracia Fellmeth, Alan Stein, Fiona Alderdice

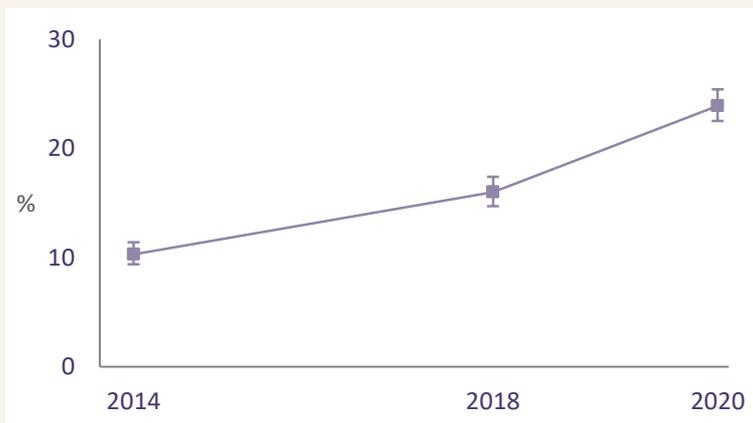
NIHR Policy Research Unit in Maternal and Neonatal Health and Care, National Perinatal Epidemiology Unit, University of Oxford  
<https://www.npeu.ox.ac.uk>

## Policy implications

- Robust strategies are needed for early identification and appropriate management of women with pre-existing long-term and/or antenatal mental health problems.
- Follow-up of women and assessment of postnatal mental health is needed beyond the routine postnatal check.
- Mechanisms to identify and support women need to remain in place, and ideally be strengthened, during times of heightened risk such as the pandemic.

## Key findings

- The prevalence estimate of postnatal depression for women who gave birth during the pandemic was alarmingly high (24%), even six months after childbirth.
- There was evidence of an upward trend in the prevalence of postnatal depression prior to the pandemic (from 10% in 2014 to 16% in 2018) and a further large increase in prevalence during the pandemic (from 16% to 24%).



- Risk factors for postnatal depression before and during the pandemic were long-term and antenatal mental health problems, whereas greater satisfaction with birth and higher social support were protective.
- The risk and protective factors remained the same for women who gave birth before or during the pandemic.

## How we did the research

Systematic review evidence indicates higher prevalence of postnatal depression during the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic rates.<sup>1</sup> However, high heterogeneity across studies makes it difficult to compare prevalence estimates reliably and to evaluate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on postnatal depression. Furthermore, studies conducted during the pandemic are limited in number and by size, non-population-based samples, and lack of comparable pre-pandemic data.

We combined data from three large nationally-representative maternity surveys in England in 2014 (N=4,571),<sup>2</sup> 2018 (N=4,509)<sup>3</sup> and 2020 (N=4,611).<sup>4</sup> Women were identified by the Office for National Statistics using birth registration records. All were at least 16 years old, had given birth in England, and were contacted three to six months after childbirth.

We examined prevalence and factors associated with postnatal depression six months after childbirth for women who gave birth before and during the pandemic. Postnatal depression was assessed using the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale. All estimates were weighted to account for varying response rates among women with different demographic characteristics.

## Further information

<sup>1</sup> Iyengar U, Jaiprakash B, Haitsuka H, Kim S. One Year Into the Pandemic: A Systematic Review of Perinatal Mental Health Outcomes During COVID-19. *Front. Psychiatry* 2021;12: 674194.

<sup>2</sup> Redshaw M, Henderson J. Safely delivered: a national survey of women's experience of maternity care 2014. Oxford: National Perinatal Epidemiology Unit, University of Oxford 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Harrison S, Alderdice F, Henderson J, Quigley MA. You and Your Baby: A national survey of health and care. Oxford: National Perinatal Epidemiology Unit, University of Oxford 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Harrison S, Alderdice F, McLeish J, Quigley MA. You & Your Baby: A national survey of health and care during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. Nuffield Department of Population Health, University of Oxford 2021.

This research is funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Policy Research Programme, conducted through the Policy Research Unit in Maternal and Neonatal Health and Care, PR-PRU-1217-21202. The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.