

Factors Influencing the Uptake of Vaccinations amongst Pregnant Women Following the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract : The problem: Vaccinations are routinely offered to pregnant women in the UK for influenza (flu), pertussis (whooping cough), and COVID-19, yet the uptake of these vaccinations in pregnancy remains low. Pregnant women are at increased risk of hospitalisation, morbidity, and mortality from these preventable illnesses, which can also expose their unborn babies to an increased risk of serious complications, including in utero death. This research aims to explore how pregnant women feel about vaccinations offered during pregnancy (flu, whooping cough, and COVID-19), particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. It also aims to examine factors influencing women's decisions about vaccinations during pregnancy and how they feel about their health and vulnerabilities to illness arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. The approach: This is a qualitative study involving semi-structured interviews with pregnant women and midwives in the UK. Interviews with pregnant women explored their views since the COVID-19 pandemic about vaccinations offered during pregnancy and whether the pandemic has influenced perceptions of vulnerability to illness in pregnant women. Interviews with midwives explored vaccination discussions they routinely have with pregnant women and identified some of the barriers to vaccination that pregnant women discuss with them. Pregnant women were recruited via participating hospitals and community groups. Midwives were recruited via participating hospitals and midwife-specific social media groups. All interviews were conducted remotely (using telephone or Microsoft Teams) and analysed using thematic analysis. Findings: 43 pregnant women and 16 midwives were recruited and interviewed. The findings presented will focus on data from pregnant women. Pregnant women reported a wide range of views and vaccination behaviour, and identified several factors influencing their decision whether to accept vaccinations or not. These included internal factors (comprised of beliefs about susceptibility to illness, perceptions of immunity, fear, and feelings of responsibility), other influences (including visibility of illness and external influences such as healthcare professional recommendations), vaccination-related factors (comprised of beliefs about effectiveness and safety of vaccinations, availability and accessibility of vaccinations and preferences for alternative forms of protection to vaccination) and COVID-19 specific factors (including COVID-19 vaccinations and COVID-19 specific influences). Implications: Findings identified some of the factors that affect pregnant women's decisions when deciding to have a vaccination or not and how these decisions have been influenced by COVID-19. Findings highlight areas where healthcare professional advice needs to focus, such as the provision of information about the increased vulnerability to illnesses during pregnancy and consideration of opportunistic vaccination at hospital appointments to maximise uptake of vaccinations during pregnancy. Findings of this study will inform the development of an intervention to increase vaccination uptake amongst pregnant women.

Keywords : vaccination, pregnancy, qualitative, interviews, COVID-19

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