



COVID-19: Changes in Pregnancy and Maternity Care Advice for Women and Their Families

Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine

Patient Education Committee

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The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted changes in how doctors' offices and hospitals practice medicine to protect the health and safety of patients and health care workers. Experts from the Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine offer the following information and advice if you have an upcoming obstetrics (OB) or ultrasound appointment or are due to give birth soon.

Restrictions for Prenatal Care Appointments and Ultrasounds

- Telehealth appointments may replace some of your in-person OB check-ups. Telehealth has been around for a long time, but it's more popular than ever during the recent pandemic. Experts in OB care are learning that if you have a healthy pregnancy, it is often safer for you to use telehealth for some appointments during this time of social distancing. If you have access to a smartphone or a computer, and in some cases, even just a telephone, you can participate in telehealth. Telehealth appointments are also useful if you think you may have symptoms of an illness. In this situation, it's better to stay at home to avoid potentially spreading germs to others in a doctor's office. Your health care provider can assess your symptoms and provide treatment guidance. If you need prescription medication, it can be requested electronically from your pharmacy.

- Ultrasound exams involve close contact between you and the person performing your exam (the sonographer). Your health care provider may ask that you limit the number of people you bring to your ultrasound appointment to reduce the chance of spreading the COVID-19 virus to other patients and health care workers. Your sonographer may wear a mask, and you and any guests may be asked to wear masks as well. Some offices may not allow any visitors or support persons to accompany you to ultrasound appointments. Not being able to share your ultrasound exam with loved ones can be disappointing, but it's necessary to keep you, your fetus, and health care workers safe.
- Before you have an ultrasound exam or in-person appointment, you may be contacted by phone and asked if you and anyone you are bringing have symptoms of COVID-19 (such as fever, sore throat, cough, or change in smell or taste) or have any other risk factors, such as recent travel, work history, living in densely populated housing, or recent exposure to someone with COVID-19. Sometimes, this screening happens when you arrive for your appointment. Be honest in your answers. If you have symptoms—even if they are mild—you should let your provider know before you arrive. Your health care provider may reschedule your exam to a future date if it's safe to do so for your pregnancy. If your visitors have symptoms or have been recently exposed to the virus, they should stay home.
- Some offices are allowing patients to use video conferencing apps (Facetime, Zoom, Skype) with loved ones for all or part of their ultrasound exams. Ask your health care provider if you can use this technology during your exam.
- Remember to follow basic personal protection practices whenever you need to leave your house, whether it's to the grocery store or your doctor's office. Wash your hands frequently for 20 seconds with soap and water, use hand sanitizer when soap and water are not available, maintain social distancing (eg, stay 6 feet apart from others), and practice good cough hygiene (cough into your arm). At home, clean and sanitize surfaces frequently, especially those that you touch often and those that come in contact with food.

Restrictions for Women in the Hospital

Many hospitals are limiting the number of visitors and support persons that can be present in labor and delivery rooms and on the recovery floor. The number of visitors and support people that you can bring probably depends on your community's level of infection. Most facilities are allowing at least one support person for women giving birth. It's understandable to be anxious, sad, or angry about the uncertainty of this situation. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Know that even if you're limited to 1 support person, you will receive a lot of help and encouragement from highly skilled professionals, including registered nurses, your doctor, and the doctors on call, throughout your labor and delivery. Nurses who specialize in labor and delivery are seasoned labor coaches. They work closely with women in labor and can provide invaluable advice about breathing techniques, labor positions, and useful tools like birthing balls and pillows. Even for women having a normal labor and delivery, a nurse is usually always available. At no time will you lack support.
- Some hospitals are allowing the use of video conferencing apps to connect with family and friends during labor and delivery, but this practice is not universal. There are legal issues with filming medical procedures, including childbirth, and some hospitals do not permit video in the delivery room for this reason. Some may permit it during labor and the postpartum stay, but not during the actual birth. Be sure to ask your hospital about its specific policy and whether you need to get your doctor's permission as well to do so.
- You and your support person will be screened for COVID-19 when you arrive at the hospital. Any visitor with respiratory symptoms or fever will not be allowed into the facility, so keep that in mind when deciding who your support person will be. Once inside the hospital, your support person may need to wear a mask or other personal protective equipment. They will not be allowed to go to other areas of the hospital or visit the newborn nursery.
- If you have symptoms of COVID-19 when you come to the hospital, you will be tested for the virus. If you test positive, you may be assigned a room in an area set aside for women with the virus. Your nurses and other attendants will

wear masks and other protective clothing as they care for you, but the level of support and comfort you receive will not be affected. You and visitors may be asked to wear masks as well.

- If you test positive for COVID-19, or if you have symptoms but your test results aren't back yet, it may be suggested that you and your baby stay in separate rooms. You and your health care team will make this decision together based on your individual situation and what's best for both you and your baby.
- At this time, the COVID-19 virus has not been found in breast milk. Breastfeeding is still encouraged for its many benefits, including protecting your baby against illnesses. If you choose to breastfeed, precautions are recommended, such as wearing a mask while breastfeeding or pumping into a bottle and having someone who is not sick feed the baby.
- According to media reports, as a result of hospital visitor restrictions, some women have decided to give birth at home. Homebirth has many risks. Problems can happen during any birth, often with little or no warning. Also, because of the pandemic, if an emergency at home were to develop, ambulance service may not be readily available. Licensed and accredited hospitals and birth centers remain safe places to give birth in the United States.
- In some areas, hospitals without visitor restrictions have been flooded with requests from women who want to transfer their care. While this might seem to be a good solution, it places an undue staffing and equipment burden on these hospitals. Also, traveling from an area where the virus is widespread to an area with lower levels of infection may hasten the spread of the disease. Experts say that keeping the virus contained is one of the key ways to control the outbreak. Finally, your pregnancy care provider may not have privileges at the hospital you want to transfer to. Transferring your care may mean that you'll be switching caregivers, and your new provider may not know you and your history as well.

Hospital rules are changing quickly as more information about COVID-19 is gathered and shared among health care experts. A lot about COVID-19 is still not known. Decisions that a hospital makes one day may change the next day as new

guidelines are issued from infection control experts. For now, keep yourself informed, and talk to your health care provider if you have questions. What all of us do now can affect not only your and your baby's health, but the health of other women, their babies, and health care workers as well.