



Covid-19 Food Study

Policy Briefing: Mothers with Infants

During the first national lockdown (March 2020), pregnant women were advised to reduce social contact and work from home where possible. Professional and peer face-to-face support for mothers has reduced or is unavailable. According to the Trades Union Congress, 71 per cent of working mothers who requested furlough to care for their children were refused this and were instead forced to take unpaid leave. We interviewed households and organisations about food and eating in the East of England during the Covid-19 pandemic. This policy briefing summarises the findings from interviews with mothers with infants.

Recommendations for Policy:

Mothers and pregnant women say they are unable to get the support they would ordinarily receive and their infants are missing out on opportunities that are important for social development.

We recommend:



More feeding support for mothers is urgently needed. Covid-19 has limited the support available for pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers. This is important given the potential benefits of breastfeeding for women and babies and the public health efforts to increase rates of breastfeeding in the UK.



Health Visitors are urged to prioritise checks on mothers' mental wellbeing, as well as their baby's development, to ensure mothers are getting the emotional support they need.



Clear advice should be provided to pregnant women and new mothers about the extent to which they should self-isolate.

Food and Eating Challenges for Mothers with Infants:

- Some women who gave birth at the beginning or during lockdown say that the restrictions mean they have more time at home with their babies. This valuable time helped some to successfully establish breastfeeding routines and/or introduce solid foods.
- Some women say that Health Visitors appeared reluctant to provide face-to-face contact at the start of the pandemic, and they felt guilty for asking them for more support. Although mothers found it difficult to manage without this, many relied on family, friends and online networks via mobile phone apps and groups on social media. These apps became community hubs that were useful places to find out where to buy nappies and formula milk when there were shortages in the shops.

“ It’s been nice to slow down and I definitely think that breastfeeding [routine] has felt the benefit of it.”
- Leah; a new mother on maternity leave.

- Mothers who asked for more support with their mental health were signposted to relevant services but often these referrals were not followed-up by the relevant professionals or services.

Challenges Identified by Support Services for Mothers with Infants:

- Ordinarily Health Visitors carry out face-to-face antenatal and postnatal visits. However, during lockdown, many Health Visitors were redeployed into nursing and administrative roles meaning that they were unable to carry out these visits as normal. Where visits were not cancelled completely, women were sometimes offered remote telephone appointments as an alternative. Health Visitors are currently being redeployed to support the vaccine rollout.
- Mothers are missing the regular face-to-face child clinics where they would ordinarily receive feeding and social support, baby weighing and ‘stay and play’ sessions with other parents and babies. Face-to-face clinics are sometimes offered on a one-to-one basis and by appointment only, meaning there is no social interaction with other parents and babies.
- Support workers have observed that more mothers than usual are disclosing feelings of ‘low mood’ at 3-months postnatal.
- Health Visitors have commented that there has been a sharp increase in the number of mothers asking for food bank referrals since the lockdown. For example, one Health Visitor stated referrals have increased from two every five months pre-Covid, to approximately one every week during Covid-19.
- Services have also reported that mothers and pregnant women are confused about the extent to which they should continue to socially isolate.

Case Study: Amber

Amber is a new mother currently on maternity leave, with a 6 month-old baby. Her husband is in employment but currently furloughed. Amber said she and her baby are unable to attend mother and baby groups. Therefore, they are both missing out on valuable social interaction and support. She has been unable to get her baby weighed and has found it difficult to get nappies and formula milk during lockdown. She describes feeling ‘robbed’ and worried about her child’s development. She has also said that learning to breastfeed has been stressful, painful and ‘overwhelming’ and she would benefit from more support.

The Impact of Coronavirus on Food and Eating in the East of England:

The information presented here is based on the findings from a study on the impact of Covid-19 on food and eating in the East of England. Since May 2020, we have been interviewing East of England residents, community stakeholders, and professionals about how people in the region are managing with their food and how they are being supported locally. The interim report can be found here: <https://doi.org/10.18745/pb.23113>

More information about the study can be found [here](#). This research is funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Applied Research Collaboration (ARC) East of England. Please visit our website to find out more about our work [here](#). The views expressed are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the NHS, the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.