



The information and support needs of pregnant people and caregivers of infants and young children during Covid-19

Covid-19 has prompted unexpected change to the way's whānau expect to birth and parent infants and young children. 465 people living in Aotearoa New Zealand were surveyed on their experiences of being pregnant, birthing and caring for young children during Covid-19. People were able to respond to this survey over a two-week period, from the 23th of March to the 3rd of April, which fell during the nationwide level 4 lockdown.

The key themes this survey addressed were birthing, breastfeeding, education and antenatal care, access to equipment, support, wellbeing and childcare. Anxieties predominantly centred around;

- Lack of information
- Changes to birth plans
- Loss of access to in-person care
- Declines in mental health and wellbeing
- Difficulties with balancing childcare and working while home
- Losing support networks
- Inability to access needed equipment for pregnancy/infancy

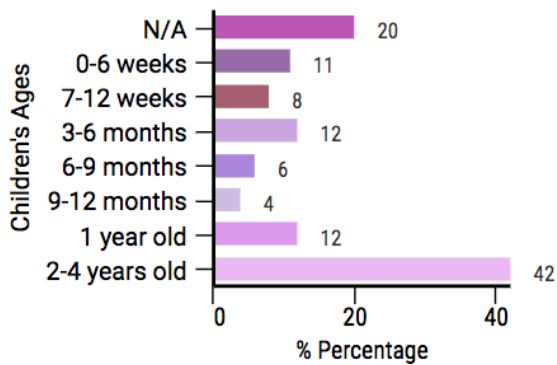
Such data provides a unique understanding of the experiences of pregnant people and those with infants and young children during a national state of emergency. These insights highlight areas of improvement that organisations can incorporate in order to be responsive and resilient in times of crisis.

Demographics

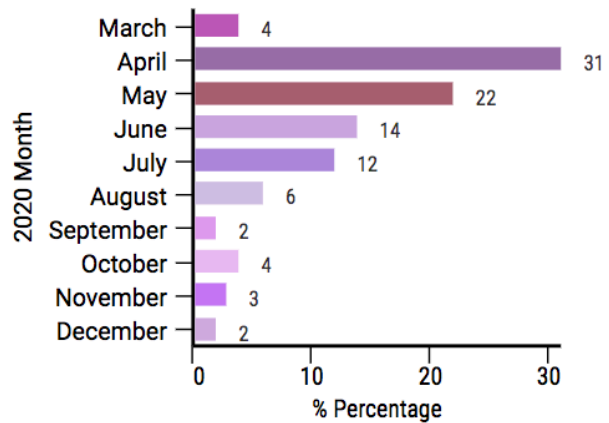
465 people responded to the survey. Most participants were based in Tāmaki Makaurau / Auckland (36%) and Te Whanganui-a-Tara/Wellington (17%), and the most represented ethnic groups were NZ European/Pākehā (82%), NZ Māori (14%) and British (7%). People aged 25-34 (60%) and 35-44 (33%) accounted for a majority of respondents.

80% of respondents were caring for infants or young children under five years old, and 36% were currently pregnant. The highest reported due date was April (31%), meaning nearly a third of survey respondents are likely to birth during the level 4 lockdown.

If you are caring for infants and young children, what are their ages?

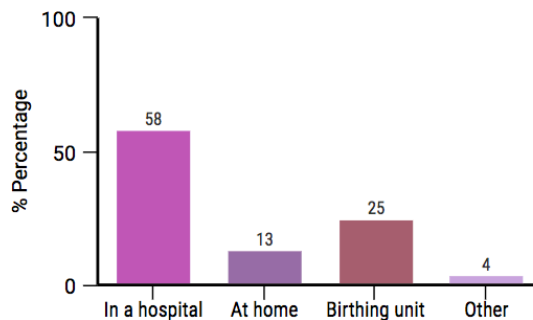


When is your expected due date?

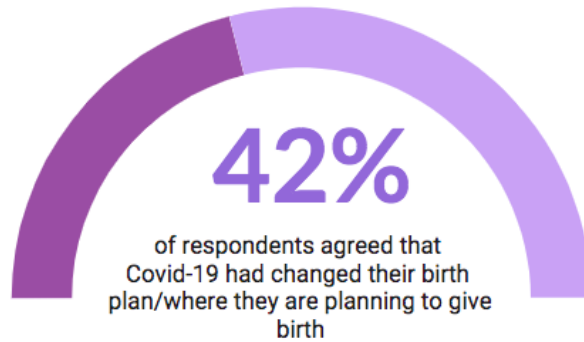


Birthing

Where are you planning on giving birth?



58% of respondents were planning on birthing in a hospital, with a further 25% intending to birth in birthing units or maternity hospitals. 13% of people were planning on having a home birth. This is a considerable increase from the national average for home births, which has remained stable at 3% over the last decade. 42% of respondents indicated that Covid-19 had changed their birthing plan



Support

A primary concern was the possibility of birthing without partners or support people present.

“I am now considering home birth as an option as my support people are not going to be able to be present in the hospital”.

“I’m pregnant with twins and the idea of not having my independent midwife and partner there to support me is overwhelming. If a home birth is possible then I will definitely consider this over the hospital”

“After the lockdown, the birthing centre originally made an announcement that no visitors were allowed, and partners could attend the birth but had to leave straight after... These types of policy rules have made me rethink where I should birth and have postnatal care. In other words, perhaps a home birth or even going home straight after the birth would be better suited to my situation but not necessarily for the wellbeing of myself and/or baby. These restrictions have caused high anxiety and made me rethink my plan”.

Childcare

In addition to worrying about hospital policies, many families birth plans had been changed due to lack of childcare.

“I will have to give birth alone as my hubby will have to stay home with our son due to only being allowed one support person at the hospital and being in lock down”.

“I feel that a home birth is better because if I go to the birthing unit I would be on my own while my partner looks after our son because he can’t come to the unit anymore”.

Home birth

Many respondents felt had felt they had had to change their birth plan due to Covid-19, feeling as though they were forced to now choose between either birthing alone in the hospital without support people, or deciding to have a home birth.

"We aren't sure at the moment. We aren't comfortable with a home birth and want to go to the hospital. But the idea of my partner not having access to me and baby is really distressing for me. So, I feel like I have two impossible choices".

"I'm going to try a home birth but as much as I don't want to, I also don't want to be without my family at the time".

"I have changed my birth plan last minute to birth at home to safeguard my support as it's unclear what the situation will be for us when I birth".

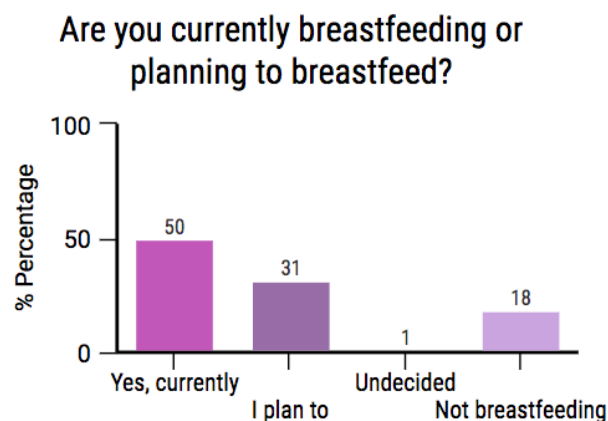
Anxiety

Many respondents were also unsure of where they would birth, finding themselves in the situation where their birth plan may now be not possible. Changes to birth plans had caused significant anxiety for many participants.

"Fingers crossed we get some consistency and support soon, and our support is safeguarded, rather than being alone during our most vulnerable time. Mental health is at severe risk - both in mothers and fathers. The way we are being treated is inhumane and has been causing me crippling anxiety".

"I had a comprehensive maternal mental health birth care plan, but it is now very much redundant".

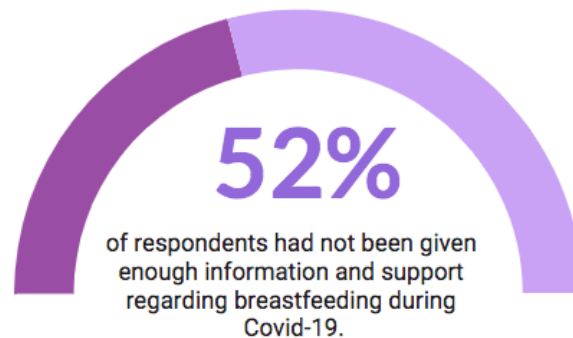
Breastfeeding



50% of respondents were currently breastfeeding, and a further 31% were planning to breastfeed. 18% were not breastfeeding, and 1% had not yet decided whether or not they would breastfeed. Only 12% of families stated that Covid-19 had informed their decision to initiate or continue breastfeeding. These participants commented that they felt

breastfeeding's importance had been highlighted by Covid-19, citing immunological benefits and the risk of not being able to access formula during lockdown.

"[Covid-19] has strengthened my resolve to continue breastfeeding despite issues with recurrent thrush as I want to support his immune system as much as possible and not have to worry about not being able to get hold of formula".



52% of respondents felt they had not received enough information or support regarding breastfeeding during Covid-19. Respondents wanted information to come from their midwife, Plunket, lactation consultants and an official statement from the Government.

"I have no information and no idea what to do especially if I have issues".

Many first-time parents indicated the need for in-person appointments with lactation consultants.

"I have had troubles with latching and extreme nipple pain as a result. My midwife can't come around. The support agencies aren't able to help".

"I am worried I won't be able to have the practical in-person help I will certainly need as a first-time mum".

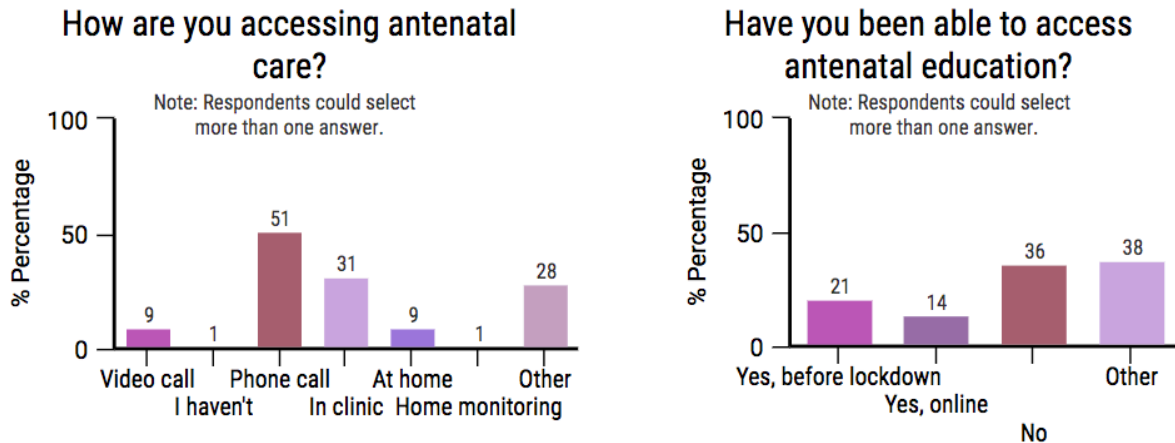
There was also confusion over whether breastfeeding can be continued if the breastfeeding parent became infected with Covid-19.

"Myself and others I have spoken to have wanted reassurance that it is ok to still breastfeed if unwell with flu like symptoms and what precautions to take".

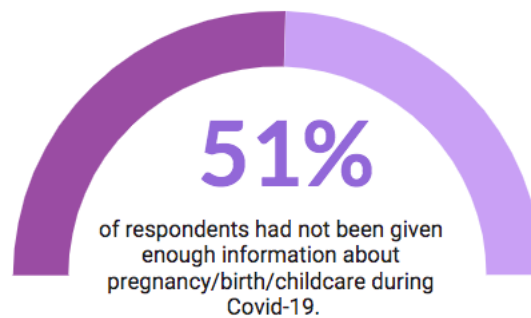
The respondents who had received breastfeeding support (46%) had gained this through their midwife, Plunket, La Leche League, Facebook and researching on the internet.

Education and Antenatal Care

Most respondents were using technology to access antenatal care (60%). Although many were still receiving in-person care (40%) it is likely this figure will have dropped as level 4 restrictions tightened. This is reflected in the 28% of respondents who had selected 'other', with many commenting that they were unsure how they would be receiving care going forwards.



While most respondents felt they had been given adequate antenatal care, 51% indicated not receiving enough information about pregnancy, birth and childcare during Covid-19.



Consistent Information

Respondents who were not satisfied with the level of care and information provided were often concerned by the lack of consistent guidance from health professionals and the government. This had led to a lot of confusion and anxiety.

"There hasn't been clear rules or announcements made about labour and birth throughout the whole Covid-19 pandemic. It's extremely stressful not knowing what you can and can't do when you're so close to giving birth and most of your decisions being taken away from you".

"There is a lot of confusion amongst pregnant women at the moment. I wish there was more info".

In-Person Care

Many respondents were also anxious about the lack of in-person care available. Concerns over how practical parenting skills would be taught without in-person guidance and fears due to the potential risk of receiving fewer physical check-ups while pregnant were common.

"In terms of learning basic skills such as swaddling etc, we are missing out on practical exercises and learning".

"Not having regular check-ups as would normally occur at this stage is quite unnerving as you don't know if baby and you are okay".

"How do I learn about breastfeeding/burping/nappy changes/rashes etc without someone to show me?".

Health System Capacity

Respondents were also worried about whether the health care system could provide proper antenatal care during Covid-19.

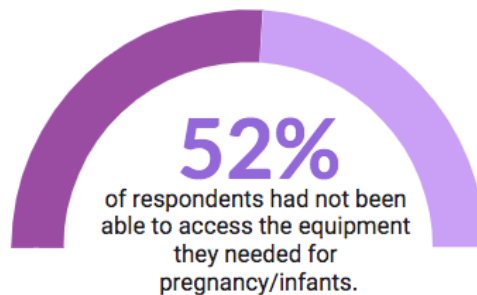
"[The] clinic has been rushed and I don't feel confident they are ready".

"I do feel the government have forgotten about pregnant women".

"I don't feel like the level of care will be able to be maintained with the pressure on midwives and hospitals".

"[My midwife] has obviously forgotten about me or didn't see me as a priority".

Access to Equipment



Access to equipment had been a concern for 52% of respondents. This was mostly due to a lack of available options in the supermarket and not having enough time to get warmer

clothing and furniture before shops were closed. A few participants commented that the options that were available during lockdown were not affordable.

"Babies grow so fast and it just started turning cold at night once we were in lockdown...we did not have enough time to get appropriate clothing for baby".

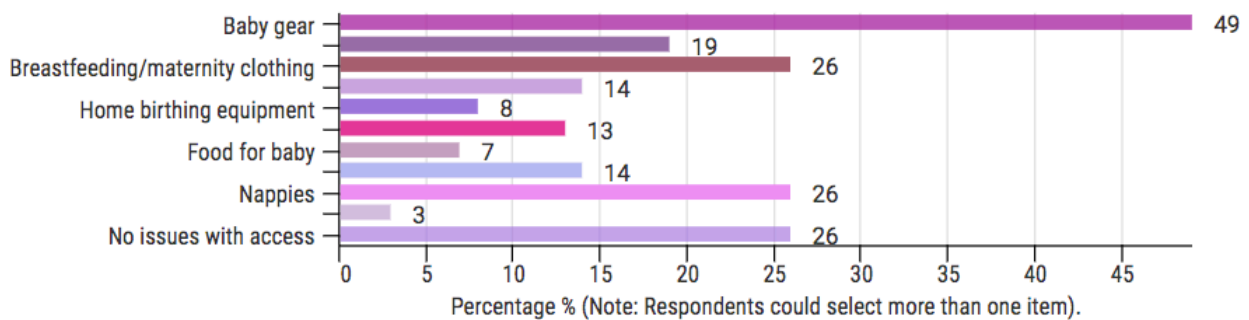
"As a new mum, I don't know what my baby might need in coming months. Not being able to go to the shops is a concern".

"I wanted to get [equipment] second hand but I don't have that option currently".

"The baby shops that are open are expensive so discriminates against those who can't afford those items".

"I need a new car seat as she is about to outgrow her capsule... It's a big worry for me".

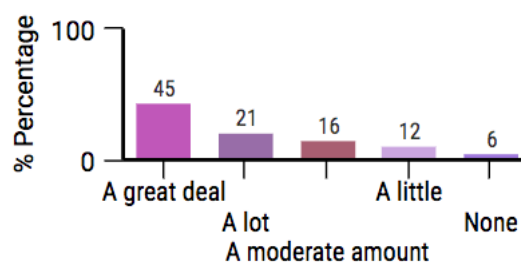
What items have you had trouble accessing/are worried about accessing?



Support and Wellbeing

94% of respondents said Covid-19 had affected their support network. Practical and emotional support had been affected, with disruptions to support services (e.g. Plunket and childcare arrangements) and being unable to see family and friends due to social distancing.

How has Covid-19 affected the support network you expected to have during pregnancy/birth?



Emotional Support

"My mental wellbeing was pretty reliant on having those in-person connections with others via playgroup".

"Social distancing has left me feeling more alone than I already did".

"I've lost my 'village'".

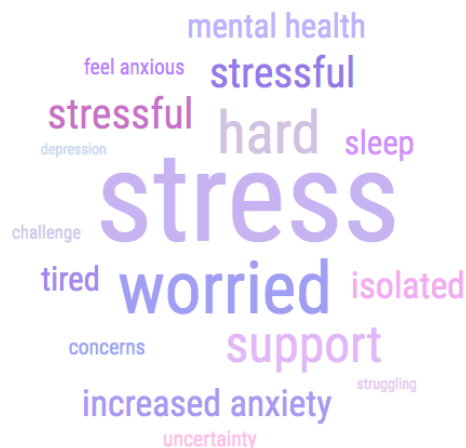
Practical Support

"I can't see my midwife or Plunket! Very isolating and baby can't be checked".

"I'm a single mum with two kids, both of whom have pre-existing conditions. I struggle to do grocery shopping".

Covid-19 had had marked impact on many respondent's wellbeing. Stress and anxiety were the most commonly reported effects. Being socially isolated had been a major source of anxiety many respondents.

How has Covid-19 affected your wellbeing?



"I am extremely lonely. I feel isolated and my depression is getting worse. I cry everyday".

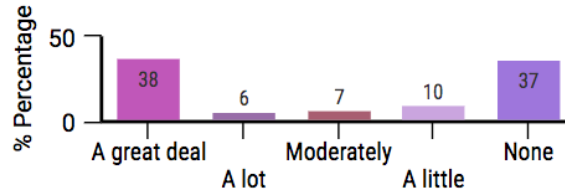
"It's made me feel isolated just as I was starting to get out about with my baby. It's hard to be shut inside all the time".

"As a new mother, I have been crying everyday due to this being an overwhelming time and a lack of support. Not great for my wellbeing".

"I am first time mum who did not imagine being in this situation, with a newborn and no support from family or friends".

Caring for Infants/Children

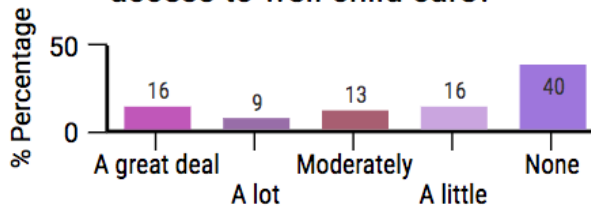
Has Covid-19 impacted your access to childcare?



Respondents childcare arrangements were mostly affected by schools/childcare centres being closed and not being able to access support from grandparents. This was particularly difficult in situations where parents were expected to take on childcare alongside their usual working hours/responsibilities.

"There is no such thing as childcare right now".

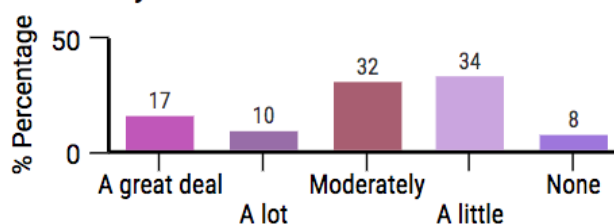
Has Covid-19 impacted your access to well child care?



Most respondents were accessing Well Child/Tamariki Ora over the phone. Respondents had mixed opinions over whether this was sufficient. Some missed face-to-face sessions, particularly in the case of new parents or parents with infants who may require more monitoring.

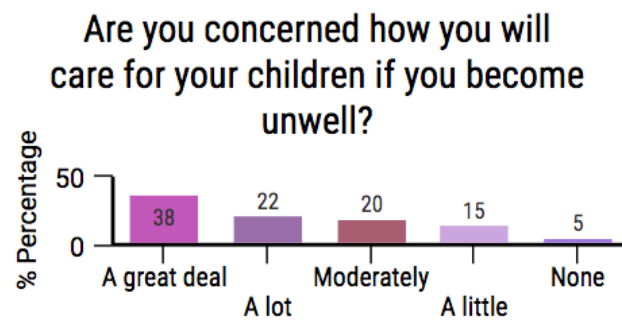
"My Plunket visit was a phone call which meant I wasn't able to have baby weighed or measured, which was key with a feeding difficulty".

Are you concerned your child/infant may become ill with Covid-19?



Parents were slightly to moderately worried that their children may contract Covid-19. Respondents who had children with health issues such as asthma were the most concerned. Additionally, families who had an essential worker in their bubble were concerned they were at higher risk of contracting Covid-19.

"My little one has chronic lung disease, so I am very worried".



Most respondents were concerned about how they would care for their child if they became unwell with Covid-19, particularly with a lack of support due to social distancing. Breastfeeding was a key concern for many families, with questions over whether they would be well enough to continue feeding.

"My concern is not being able to breastfeed... it causes me great anxiety".

Recommendations

The Covid-19 pandemic was, and will continue to be, an extraordinary circumstance. Many of the concerns expressed in this survey are out of the control of the Government and other organisations. Dissemination of information during this time was particularly difficult due to how quickly events unfolded. This was compounded by a global lack of knowledge and unpreparedness in regard to Covid-19.

Covid-19 has caused whānau/families unprecedented and unexpected pressure during what is already a commonly stressful life stage. In such times of crisis, it is clear initiatives are needed to target both mental wellbeing and provide practical assistance. The anxieties raised in this survey have highlighted many addressable gaps in Aotearoa New Zealand's current systems that may mitigate common stressors amongst whanau/families during times of crisis. These considerations provide a valuable blueprint as together we form our 'new normal'.

Vital insights to keep in mind as our 'new normal' is forged are as follows;

- Services that can cater to both emotional and practical support needs during times of crisis
- Processes to ensure relevant information in multiple accessible formats can be dispersed quickly, and that this information is concise, up-to-date and touches on key anxieties.
- Consumers know who is able to provide advice and support
- Streamlined processes for online or over-the-phone care. This could include having procedures in place so that staff and consumers know how care will be provided in times of crisis.
- The continued upkeep, expansion and promotion of online resources for pregnant people and young families.

Limitations

Online surveys are not without limitations. 82% of participants identified as NZ European/Pākeha which is not representative of Aotearoa New Zealand as a whole. Furthermore, a majority of participants resided in major city centres and 93% of participants fell within the 25-44 years old age bracket. Such lack of diversity means the results of this survey may not represent the true breadth of experiences of pregnant people/those with infants. More work needs to be done to hear, understand and respond to the experiences and support needs of Māori and Pasifika women, as well as women from other ethnic groups, teen/young parents and those in rural areas.

