Being Pregnant…
Preparing to give birth



Dr Anna Lovatt & Dr Victoria Selby, Clinical Psychologists,
Cheshire and Merseyside Specialist Perinatal Service

In collaboration with Dr Ruth O'Shaughnessy, Consultant Clinical Psychologist, Dr Elizabeth Chamberlain, Clinical Psychologist and Terri Quigley, Participation and Engagement Coordinator, Cheshire and Merseyside Specialist Perinatal Service.
@cmperinatal

A joint initiative between: Cheshire and Wirral Partnership, Mersey Care and North West Boroughs Healthcare NHS Foundation Trusts. Produced June 2020.

Being Pregnant...
Preparing to give birth

Having a new baby is an incredible life changing event. You may be feeling a mixture of emotions as you prepare for the next stages in your journey through pregnancy to meeting your baby. We are also living through the coronavirus pandemic.

This booklet aims to give you encouragement, supportive ideas and help you identify simple steps to care for your wellbeing and prepare to give birth. Lots of mums have continued to have babies safely and happily during the pandemic.



You are not alone
You will get through this

Feelings about giving birth...

As you prepare for giving birth you may feel a mixture of excitement, worry, discomfort, tiredness, and happiness. Having to get ready for childbirth during a global crisis brings many new challenges. You may have hoped to spend this time doing various things to enjoy the last part of your pregnancy and may be feeling sad that things are not as you had expected. It is entirely understandable that you may experience an increase in worries and fears and have questions about how this will affect your choices, plans and hopes.

Even though much may feel very different, there are many steps you can take to get through this uncertain time. The news is filled with lots of scary stories, but it's important to remember that you are not always given the full picture. Babies are still being born and despite all of the challenges and changes that coronavirus brings, many women are still having positive birth experiences.

Women are feeling immensely proud that they have had their babies during this extraordinary time.

Women are feeling supported, looked after and empowered.



'Birth is not only about making babies.
Birth is about making mothers…
Strong, competent, capable mothers
who trust themselves and know
their inner strength.'
Barbara Katz Rothman

Having your baby during the Coronavirus Pandemic



Midwives and maternity services are working tirelessly to ensure that you will feel supported and safe throughout your pregnancy and during your baby's birth. They understand that this is a worrying time for you and so will try to ensure that you have choices. Many options will remain the same, but some things may be different to what you had hoped.

Talk to your midwife and maternity team about your hopes and ask questions about what might be possible for you.



Birth Plans
Many maternity services are offering different birth options, including hospital births and home births. Some women find it helpful to write a plan for giving birth to describe their hopes and preferences. If you write a birth plan you could think through different options and consider a plan A, B and C to help you feel prepared in case things need to change. Some women prefer not to make a specific plan. Whether you write a birth plan or not, it is important to allow yourself to see how you feel on the day and change your mind if you want to. Remember that even with the best preparation things may not always go to plan. Your midwife and maternity team will however do everything they can to ensure you are given choices where possible and that you and your baby are looked after and safe.

Maternity Staff
Staff supporting you when you give birth may look different to what you expected. It is likely that they may be wearing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), the term used to describe masks, gowns and gloves. You may have seen your midwife wearing these before in antenatal appointments. You or your birth partner might be asked to wear these items as well. Keep in mind that all of this is being done to protect yours and your baby's safety and health. Although people will look different, don't forget that the same caring, reassuring people are behind the masks smiling with their eyes, and are still there to support and guide you through your labour.

Birth Partners
In most circumstances you will be able to have one birth partner of your choosing with you during your baby's birth, such as your partner, mum, friend, sister, aunt, or someone else you feel comfortable with. You may have a little time together after your baby is born for those first cuddles, skin-to-skin contact and to enjoy some special time with your baby. Your birth partner may not however be able to stay with you for very long and may have to leave a short time later. It may feel frightening thinking about being on your own after giving birth, but it may be helpful to:



- Remember how you have already coped going to other appointments on your own, such as antenatal appointments and scans. It may not be ideal, but you have got through this before and it won't be long before you will be back with the people you care about and feel supported by again.

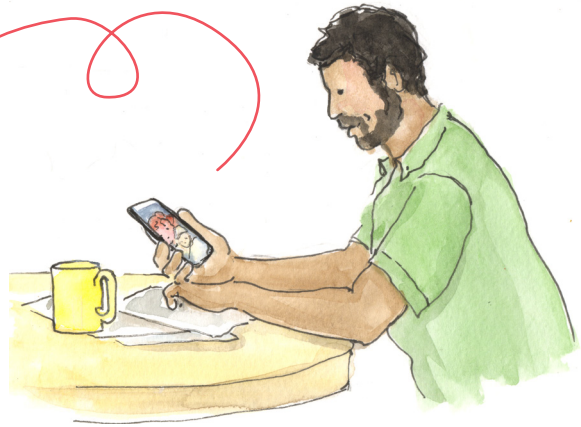
- Maternity staff realise that this may feel hard and they will do their best to support you and your baby. Do ask for help if you need to.

- Remember, you will not be alone. Other mums are going through the same, and you will be there together.



- You can stay connected to your partner, friends or family by phone or messaging. You can take photos of your baby to share with them. You may also want to bring something with you in your hospital bag to help you feel connected to your partner or loved ones. Some women like to have something like an item of jewellery, or another special object with them. Others like to have supportive messages and words of comfort from family and friends saved on their phone to listen to if needed.

- Many mums have found having a short time alone with their baby without any other interruptions or distractions can feel really special to start getting to know and bond with their baby. It can be a time to just be with your baby, to watch them, to wonder about them and enjoy those precious cuddles.



Birth Rights
Your birth rights during Covid-19 remain the same. You can contact the Association for Improvement in Maternity Services (AIMS) or Birth Rights for support about your birthing options and experiences (see resources section for details).

Looking after your wellbeing

It is completely understandable to be feeling more stressed as you approach your due date when many things may feel uncertain and outside of your control. Preparing to give birth can be worrying for any mum-to-be, even at the best of times. Feeling worried or anxious is not your fault or a sign that there is something wrong with you.

It is therefore important to try to find small steps you can take to look after your wellbeing as you approach giving birth.

You may find it helpful to:

Connect with friends and family
Not being able to see family and friends in person can feel tough. Try to keep in contact with people that you feel close to and that you value spending time with. Reach out and reconnect, by phone, messages, video calls…

If you are struggling to connect with friends and family please do let someone know and ask for help with this.

Connect with your baby
Try to make time each day to connect with your baby. You could try:

- Talking and singing to your baby, knowing they can hear you.
- Gently massage, stroke or touch your tummy.
- Play relaxing or calming music to your baby.
- Give yourself time to pause and think about your baby. You may find that having a bath or going for a walk gives you some space to focus on your baby.
- You may like to keep a diary or email your baby.

Not everyone feels connected to their baby straight away and it may take a little time. If you are worried about your feelings towards your baby, speak to someone; your partner, friends, family or midwife, as there is help and support available.

' A mother's joy begins when new life is stirring inside… when a tiny heartbeat is heard for the very first time, and a playful kick reminds her that she is never alone.'
Unknown



You may find it helpful to:

Get reliable information
The news and social media are often filled with alarming stories to capture peoples' attention, but it is important to remember that they do not necessarily give you the full picture. If you find that reading the news and looking at social media is making you worry more it may be helpful to give yourself a break from this. Turn off news notifications, limit the amount of time you spend following the news, avoid checking for at least an hour before you go to bed, or try to ensure that you are only getting information from reliable sources.

Your midwife can answer any medical or birth related questions that you have. Additionally the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (RCOG) and Royal College of Midwives (RCM) have shared guidance on birthing during Covid-19, which is updated regularly.

You may also find it comforting and reassuring to instead read about women's positive experiences of birth.

'Giving birth should be your greatest achievement not your greatest fear.'
Jane Weideman

Ask for advice
If you have any concerns about yours or your baby's health during your pregnancy, do contact your midwife or GP for advice. It is important that you continue to follow the advice of your midwife team and ensure that you seek help if anything seems out of the ordinary for your pregnancy.



Listen to your body
Our bodies are amazing at letting us know what we need so try to listen to yours. Rest or have an early night when you are tired, eat healthily if you can, drink plenty of fluids, and try to get some gentle exercise regularly.

Find your own rhythm and routine
You may find it helpful to create a nourishing routine. Try to create space each day for things that help you to take care of yourself; your body, your mental wellbeing and your feelings. Take time to relax, to get washed and dressed and if helpful, try some online pregnancy yoga, relaxation or hypnobirthing exercises. Make time each day for the small tasks that help your week run smoother and help you prepare for the arrival of your baby.

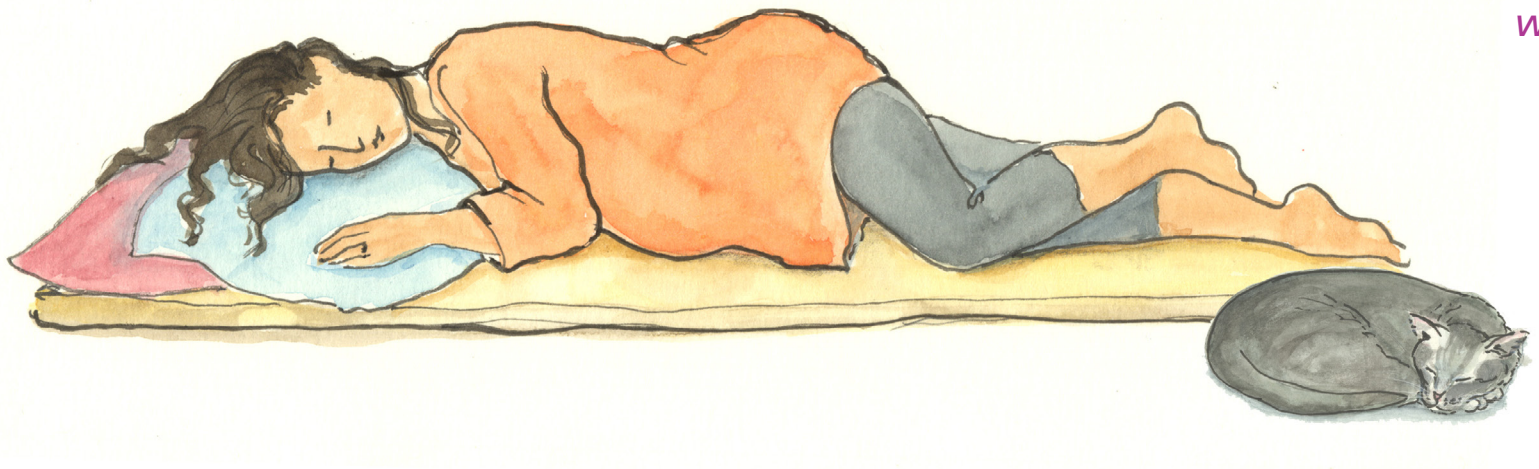
Remember you are not alone
Many people are feeling worried including mums-to-be, their families and maternity staff. Talk through your anxieties with someone sensible that you trust – this may help you to think about things in a different way. You may also notice people have similar feelings too. You may still be able to join ante-natal classes online. Make time to talk about other things as well, to take a break from the things you feel anxious about.

Coping with feelings

Becoming a mum is one of the biggest transitions in a woman's life and so it is natural to experience a multi-coloured patchwork of feelings at this time. When a woman becomes pregnant her body, brain and emotions will undergo substantial changes to prepare her for becoming a mum. It is very normal to start feeling more sensitive to any source of threat or danger to yourself or your baby and more sensitive to negative emotions. For those who have experienced stressful life events, or who have had a difficult early life themselves, becoming a mum can reawaken old memories which may bring up questions and fears.

It therefore makes sense that the current coronavirus pandemic can trigger this sense of threat and danger, increasing feelings of worry and anxiety, especially about giving birth. It's not your fault if you feel this way.

But there is hope and strength even in times of uncertainty. There are things that you can do to prepare to increase your confidence and courage. You can find ways of coping with your feelings and practice strategies to calm and soothe yourself through your pregnancy and when giving birth.

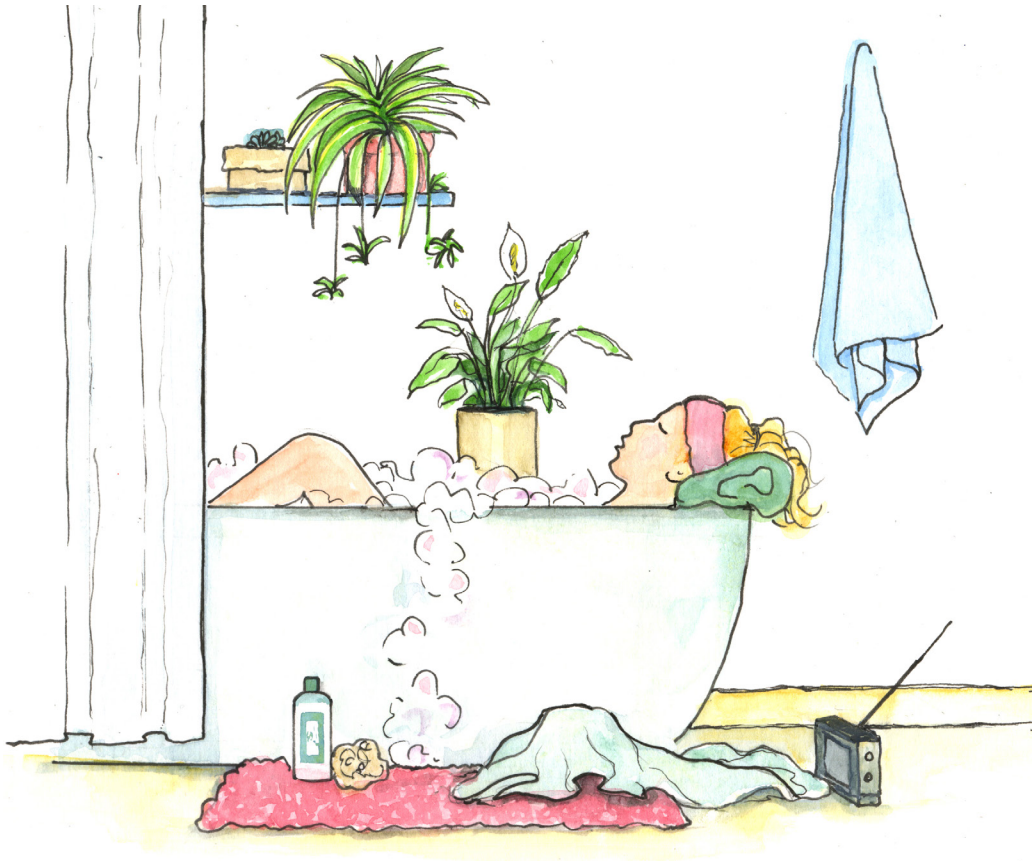


'Everything grows rounder and wider and weirder, and I sit here in the middle of it all and wonder who in the world you will turn out to be.'
Carrie Fisher

You may find it helpful to…

Try to accept and let go of what you cannot control
Changing a difficult situation isn't always possible. Instead, try to concentrate on the things you do have choice and control over. Speak to your midwife about the choices you do have and your birth rights.

Ask questions
If you're concerned about going into hospital and worry about being exposed to the coronavirus during labour, ask your midwife what steps they're taking and for their best guidance around staying healthy.



Feel your feelings
If you feel sad, frustrated or scared, remember these feelings are understandable and not your fault. Feelings will come and go like waves and even painful feelings will eventually pass. It may be helpful to try to first notice and recognise what feelings are showing up for you, e.g. I am feeling scared, sad, relaxed. Allow yourself time to make sense of what you are experiencing. Let yourself cry if you need to, it's a really natural thing to do. Ask yourself what help you need right now.

If you feel worried about how you are feeling, or it feels as though the worries or lows are taking over, don't be afraid to seek help. Speak to the people you feel comfortable with; your partner, family or friends, or speak to your midwife, health visitor or GP. It does not mean you are not coping and you are not alone. Many other mums-to-be feel this way. It just means you may need some help to get back on track.

Self-soothing
Self-soothing is a coping skill we can use when we feel anxious or distressed to calm ourselves and feel settled and at peace. We know that comforting and soothing ourselves in this way calms our emotions and sends calming messages all over our bodies. It can be helpful to think of things to try that calm you through your different senses: sight, smell, taste, touch and hearing. This may include for example, music, a blanket or cushion, lowering the lighting, a favourite perfume or smell, a favourite food or drink, stroking a pet, a photo of your partner or family, a stress ball, a lavender pouch, a scented hand cream, or cards and kind messages from people you care about. Some of these things may be easier to use at home, but it may also be helpful to put together a self-soothing box. This is a collection of various items or reminders you can use to comfort and soothe yourself, which you could take with you to give birth. Think of objects that that are meaningful to you.

Be kind to yourself.
Try not to shame or criticise yourself for how you feel. Remember these feelings are not your fault and instead try to treat yourself kindly. Kindness helps us to calm difficult feelings and activates our brains soothing systems.

Acknowledge with compassion that this is hard and instead ask yourself:

- What do I need right now?
- What will help me in this moment?
- What can I try to help myself?
- How can I reach out for a little help from others?

You can also try to talk to yourself in a compassionate way. Try to imagine a person who cares for you and what they might say. If it feels more comfortable, think about how you would talk to a friend who is struggling and practice talking to yourself in the same way. Being supportive, comforting and kind to ourselves can help us get through difficult moments.

'Self-compassion is simply giving the same kindness to ourselves that we would give to others'
Chris Germer

Words of encouragement
Many women find it helpful to write supportive messages in a notebook, on postcards or as a picture which they can read and bring with them for giving birth. You could include a poem, a mantra or a quote. You could write kind and caring words that people have said to you. Read them regularly in the weeks leading up to giving birth to remember and experience the feelings of hope and reassurance that they can bring.



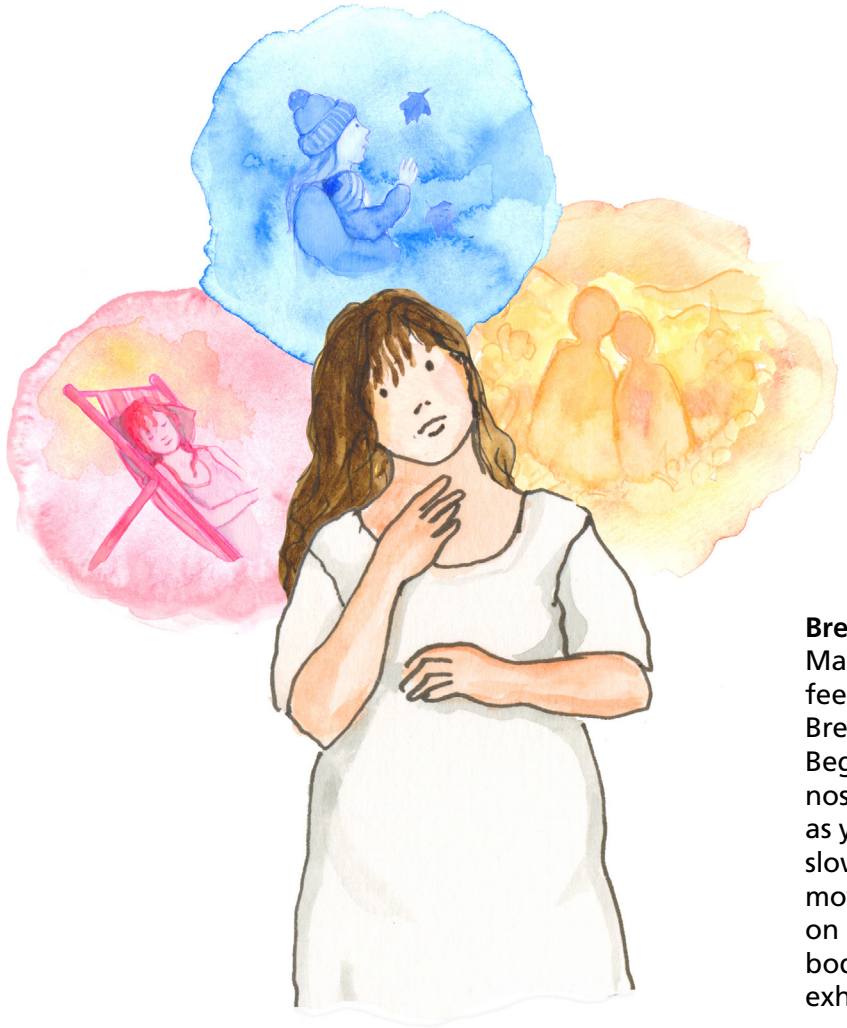
Soothing exercises

You may already have various coping strategies and skills that work well for you. Try to find time to practice these regularly. It may also be helpful to try some of the following ideas to help you to feel calm and soothed. You may find these are helpful both during your pregnancy and when giving birth.

Visualisation

A calming place…

Close your eyes and imagine being in a place where you feel calm, comfortable and relaxed. It could be a favourite place that you have been to before, or somewhere you create in your own imagination. Take your time to get a sense of this place. Look around you and notice the details. What can you see? What can you hear? What can you feel? What can you smell? For example, you may notice the colour of the sky, or the sounds of the breeze, waves or birds. You may feel the warmth of the sun on your skin or your toes in the sand. Allow yourself to create picture of this place. Try to make it as vivid in your mind as you can. Give your calming place a name to help you remember it and to find it again when you need to.



Being with your baby…

Close your eyes and picture your baby. Imagine holding your baby in your arms for the first time. Imagine what you might say to your baby when you meet them. Imagine what you can feel and hear as you hold your baby close. Imagine how you will feel being at home with your new baby and your close family. Think about what you might wish for your baby.

A colour…

Close your eyes and visualize a colour that makes you feel calm, comforted and relaxed. Imagine this colour surrounding you like a soothing mist. Imagine breathing in your calming colour or imagine your colour floats gently over you, bringing with it a sense of warmth, relaxation and kindness. Let any feelings of stress or worry gradually flow out through your feet as you let your calming colour flow through your body. Know that it will not run out and that the sole purpose of this colour is to help you, to strengthen you and to support you.

Breathing

Mastering your breathing can help when you are feeling stressed or anxious, and also during birth. Breathing helps to release tension all over your body. Begin by inhaling slowly and deeply through your nose, drawing air as deeply into your lungs and belly as you can. Pause briefly and then exhale gently and slowly out through your mouth. Feel your breath move in and out of your body. As you exhale, focus on relaxing and letting go of any tension in your body. You could think of the word ‘relax’ with each exhalation. Find a steady, comfortable rhythm.

Grounding through your senses
If you get caught in a wave of intense feelings you may find it helpful to bring your attention back to the here and now and anchor yourself in the present moment. Focusing on your senses can be a calming way to do this.

Take a deep breath to begin. Try to name...
- 5 things you can see around you
- 4 sounds you can hear right now
- 3 things you can feel or touch eg. *the chair I'm sitting on*
- 2 things you can smell right now (or 2 things you like the smell of)
- 1 take a slow deep breath and know this will pass.

Repeat this process as many times as needed.

Music
Play music. Music can be relaxing and distract you from discomfort and anxiety. You could have a playlist ready to take with you to listen to during your birth. Some people find sounds of nature can also offer a comforting distraction. Some people prefer silence. Find what feels most comfortable to you.

After giving birth
You may want to remember to prepare and pack comforting things that you would want after you give birth, in addition to the practical items you will need. Having things that make you feel like you such as, comfy clothes, some yummy snacks, favourite toiletries, flip-flops or slippers, a magazine, your phone and charger, can all help you take care of yourself and feel comfortable.

'You are pregnant and you are powerful.
You are bold and you are beautiful.
Go forward in your boldness, in your beauty and in your contentedness.
Trust your body to give birth and know that the collective power of women worldwide will be with you.'
Unknown



Preparing for and giving birth to your baby can be incredibly rewarding, strengthening and joyful. As you continue your path into motherhood remember, you can do this and you are not alone. With kindest wishes and encouragement for your journey ahead.

Helpful Organisations and Resources

- Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists www.rcog.org.uk/en/guidelines-research-services/guidelines/coronavirus-pregnancy/covid-19-virus-infection-and-pregnancy/ RCOG provide information and guidance for pregnant women and their partners.
- Tommy's www.tommys.org Tommy's fund research into miscarriage, stillbirth and premature birth, and provide pregnancy health information to parents. They support parents to have the best possible pregnancy outcomes and to take home happy, healthy babies.
- National Childbirth Trust www.nct.org.uk The NCT gives practical and emotional support with bottle feeding or breastfeeding your baby, and can help with any concerns or questions. Call 0300 330 0700, daily, 8am-midnight.
- Institute of Health Visiting https://ihv.org.uk/families/parenting-through-coronavirus-covid-19/ The iHV is dedicated to supporting the health and wellbeing of all families and have put together links and resources from trusted organisations and websites to support you during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Best Beginnings www.bestbeginnings.org.uk work to inform and empower parents who want to maximise their children's long term development and well-being. They offer a range of information, advice and resources, including, the Baby Buddy App, and many information videos for parents.
- Coping with Covid19. www.copingwithcoronavirus.co.uk Psychologists at UCL have collated information and resources to help us all during social isolation and lockdown.

Pregnancy Support

- Baby Lifeline Have pulled together a wealth of information and guidance for before, during and after birth to your baby. This includes FAQ, birth options and what happens if you are diagnosed with Covid-19. Website: https://babylifeline.org.uk/home/covid19/
- Make Birth Better dedicated to trauma in birth but has made adaptions to normalise pregnancy and birth during the pandemic. Website: makebirthbetter.org
- Birth rights Work to promote your rights during birth. Website: https://www.birthrights.org.uk/covid-19. They also have an email address: advice@birthrights.org.uk
- The Association for Improvements in Maternity Services (AIMS) www.aims.org.uk AIMS offer information and advice to support women to achieve the birth that they wanted. They also have a helpline offering information and support on 0300 365 0663 or email: helpline@aims.org.uk



Maternal Mental Health Support

- Maternal Mental Health Alliance maternalmentalhealthalliance.org offers a wealth of information and links on supporting perinatal mental health, including during the COVID-19 crisis.
- PANDAS (Pre And PostNatal Depression Advice and Support) www.pandasfoundation.org.uk Helpline open 9am – 8pm everyday 0808 1961 776 (Free). A Facebook page is also available offering inspiration, motivation and news and they also run a Facebook support group specifically for fathers.
- Open PAWS www.openpaws.co.uk is an open access resource providing evidence-based information and tools to help better understand, support and manage anxiety during pregnancy and the first year after birth.
- Maternal OCD maternalocd.org A charity that provides information and support to mums experiencing perinatal obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). For peer support email info@maternalocd.org
- Mums Aid http://mums-aid.org provides inclusive and accessible psychological therapies for mothers experiencing a broad spectrum of emotional and mental health difficulties during pregnancy or postnatally. There's a Facebook journaling group and choir.
- Royal College of Psychiatrists https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/treatments-and-wellbeing/perinatal-care-and-covid-19 The Royal College of Psychiatrists offer evidence based information on mental health problems, treatments and other topics.

Family support organisations

- Home-Start A family support charity that helps families with young children deal with the challenges they face, such as money issues, mental health, isolation and illness. Runs a local support network – find yours at home-start.org.uk
- Gingerbread Provides advice, information and practical support for single parents – from dealing with a break-up to going back to work or organising financial issues. Helpline is 0808 802 0925, 10am-6pm Mon, 10am-4pm Tu, Thu & Fri, 10am-1pm & 5pm-7pm Wed. See www.gingerbread.org.uk
- Relate Offers counselling and workshops on relationships and family issues. Book a counselling appointment on 0300 003 0396, 8am-10pm Mon-Thu, 8am-6pm Fri, 9am-5pm Sat, or have a live online chat at relate.org.uk

Cheshire and Merseyside Specialist Perinatal Services

- Cheshire and Merseyside Specialist Perinatal Service consists of 3 teams across the geographical patch. We can help women who are accessing our service to develop a birth plan and prepare for their birth.
  1. North West Boroughs Team: 01925 275303 or 07341 789 289 (contingency contact number during remote working)
  2. Merseycare Team: 0151 7024012
  3. Cheshire & Wirral Partnership Team: 0151 488 8434



Design by Amira Prescott
Illustrations by Heather Prescott