

## Perinatal Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Challenges for Psychiatry

### Saúde Mental Perinatal Durante a Pandemia COVID-19: Desafios Para A Psiquiatria

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**Palavras-chave:** COVID-19; Gravidez; Psiquiatria; Relações Materno-Fetais; Saúde Mental

Dear Editor,

The current pandemic crisis has a substantial impact on the mental health of individuals, in a proportion that cannot yet be fully estimated. As discussed by Afonso in 'The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Mental Health',<sup>1</sup> various aspects, such as social isolation, grief and economic difficulties, emerge as risk factors for the onset or worsening of mental disorders.

As such, I would like to dedicate a few words to a vulnerable group: pregnant women and new mothers. We must reflect on the short and long-term detrimental psychological effects of this pandemic on maternal health, the subsequent maternal psychiatric disorders during the perinatal period and the possible repercussions on the physical and mental health of the offspring. We should also evaluate the preparedness of Psychiatry Departments to approach the needs of this specific population.

The COVID-19 pandemic represents an enormous source of stress for women and their babies during the perinatal period.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the stress-inducing factors

affecting the general population, these women are facing additional stressors, either directly or indirectly related with the virus.<sup>2</sup> Pregnant women may be at risk of having more severe disease and preterm deliveries, with greater maternal and neonatal mortality.<sup>3</sup> Risk of miscarriage associated with COVID-19 remains unclear.<sup>3</sup> These uncertainties are expected to add to psychological stress and may even lead to elevated rates of pregnancy terminations.<sup>3</sup> During the perinatal period, women are not only apprehensive regarding the wellbeing of the unborn child, but are also more likely to experience a decreased number of antenatal and postnatal appointments or even remote consultations.<sup>2,3</sup> Furthermore, they face restrictions regarding the partner's involvement during birth and adjustments in breastfeeding recommendations.<sup>2,3</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic represents a significant risk factor for mental distress, especially anxiety, among women during pregnancy or the perinatal period.<sup>4</sup> Pregnant women living in areas with high incidence of COVID-19 and those worried about availability of food and conflict at home report greater anxiety scores.<sup>5</sup> After an outbreak, pregnant women have higher prevalence of depressive symptoms and are more likely to have thoughts of self-harm.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, Psychiatry Departments must be prepared for a challenging wave of maternal psychiatric illness during the perinatal period, with multidisciplinary teams dedicated to perinatal Mental Health. Their creation will allow a directed and specialist clinical approach to a high-risk group of the population in this exceptional time.<sup>2</sup>

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