



COVID-19: Guidance for pregnant healthcare workers

Disclaimer

The COVID-19 pandemic is an evolving situation. Health professionals should refer to the advice provided by the [Australian Department of Health](#) and the [Aotearoa New Zealand Ministry of Health](#) websites in the first instance.

Purpose

The Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (AFOEM) of The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP), recognises the risks of COVID-19 to the Australian and New Zealand population. The purpose of this document is to minimise the risk of COVID-19 infection to pregnant healthcare workers. However, the principles outlined below can apply to all pregnant workers with potential for COVID-19 exposure.^{1,2}

Background

The risk to pregnant workers will vary according to occupation, with some health care workers being in the high to very high-risk group for exposure and potential infection. The health of these workers is paramount to maintaining the healthcare workforce to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic response.

Health care workers at greater risk of COVID-19 exposure include the following:

- Medical, dental, nursing and allied health, cleaners and hospital administrative staff and any other personnel, including volunteers, who have contact with patients and visitors, unless appropriate infection prevention and control (IPC) measures are observed and recommended personal protective equipment (PPE) used.
- Any other worker in health facilities:
 - with high levels of contact with the general public, and
 - who works in a situation where physical distancing is not feasible and where risk minimisation strategies cannot or are not being used; or
 - who has been exposed to a person who has tested positive to COVID-19 without appropriate IPC precautions and use of PPE..

Although Australian and international data have so far shown that the large majority of infected people are asymptomatic or suffer only a mild to moderate illness, there is relatively little data regarding the specific effects of COVID-19 on pregnant women. Much of the available information is based upon the past experience with SARS Co-V and MERS Co-V, which are also coronaviruses.³

Due to the novel nature of the virus which was first reported in December 2019 in Wuhan City in China, there is no information as to effects in the first and second trimester, though the SARS and MERS experience was that there was no evidence of teratogenic effects on the fetus or adverse effects on

¹ Note: AFOEM has also produced *Guidance for occupational physicians providing advice on COVID-19*¹ which seek to provide advice to occupational and environmental physicians and trainees who are advising workplaces on COVID-19. This information may also be useful to other health professionals and employers themselves: https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/covid-19/racp-guidance-for-occupational-physicians-providing-advice-on-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=bdcde81a_2

² Note: AFOEM's *Guide to Pregnancy and Work* provides useful general information and advice (non COVID-19 specific) regarding workplace pregnancy issues for pregnant women in the workplace, women of reproductive capacity who are at work, employers, post-partum employees and health professionals. <https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/the-australasian-faculty-of-occupational-and-environmental-medicine-guide-to-pregnancy-and-work.pdf>

³ David A. Schwartz, Ashley L. Graham; Potential Maternal and Infant Outcomes from Coronavirus 2019-nCoV (SARS-CoV-2) Infecting Pregnant Women: Lessons from SARS, MERS, and Other Human Coronavirus Infections. *Viruses*, 2020, 12, 194:doi:10.3390/v12020194

children. The experience to date for COVID-19 appears to be following a similar pattern to these two coronaviruses.

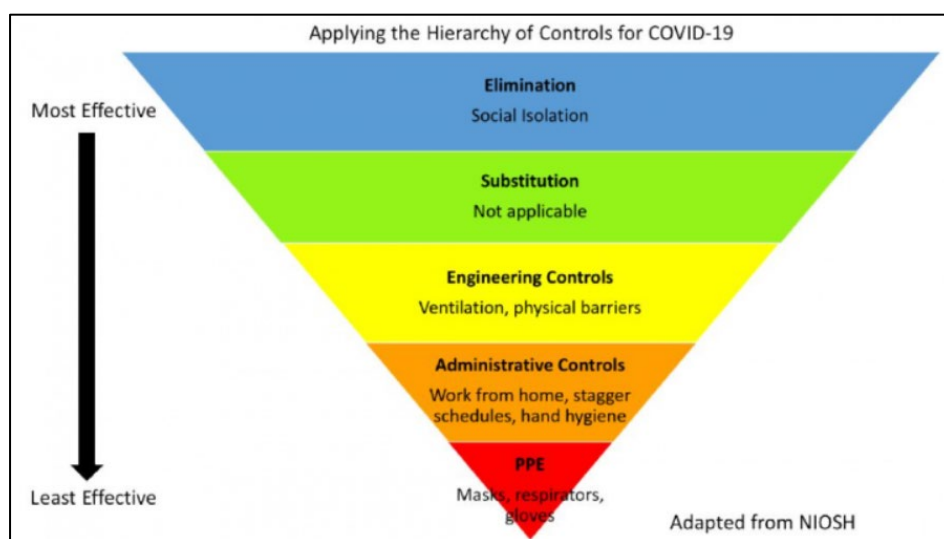
The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology (RANZCOG) has published advice and information for pregnant women and their families on COVID-19⁴, and advice for pregnant health care workers.⁵ There are links to this advice in the resources section at the end of this document. This advice states that pregnant women do not appear to be more severely unwell if they develop COVID-19 than the general population, and that the illness is mild to moderate for the majority of pregnant women. RANZCOG also advises that “women are potentially at increased risk of complications from any respiratory disease due to the physiological changes that occur in pregnancy”, these include reduced lung function, increased oxygen consumption and changed immunity.⁶ Based on the information currently available, the timing and mode of delivery should proceed according to maternal clinical conditions or obstetric factors as usual.

The risk of transmission from mother to baby is very low, and there is no evidence of an increased risk of miscarriage, or harm to the baby. Breastfeeding is safe and babies who develop COVID-19 infection usually recover quickly.

Workplace and exposure risks

Employers have a responsibility to provide a safe work environment for all their workers and to minimise exposure risks. Guidance on providing a safe work environment during the COVID-19 pandemic can be obtained from the Worksafe Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand Worksafe’s websites: <https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/covid-19-information-workplaces> and <https://worksafe.govt.nz/>.

The cornerstone of protection for all healthcare workers, including pregnant women, is based on a risk assessment of the individual’s work environment and the job tasks and duties combined with a hierarchy of organisational and individual infection prevention and control measures as shown in the figure below.



Source: Image reproduced from the Australian Government Department of Health website⁷

⁴ The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (29 March 2020), Advice and information on Coronavirus (COVID-19), <https://ranzcof.edu.au/statements-guidelines/covid-19-statement>

⁵ The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (25 March 2020), COVID-19 and pregnant health care workers and other at-risk workers: <https://ranzcof.edu.au/news/covid-19-and-pregnant-health-care-workers>

⁶ The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (25 March 2020), COVID-19 and pregnant health care workers and other at-risk workers: <https://ranzcof.edu.au/news/covid-19-and-pregnant-health-care-workers>

⁷ <https://www.health.gov.au/news/australian-health-protection-principal-committee-ahppc-coronavirus-covid-19-statements-on-24-april-2020#statement-on-the-use-of-ppe-in-hospital-with-patients-with-covid19>

Specialist occupational and environmental physicians are best placed to undertake risk assessments and would do so in collaboration with general practitioners, obstetricians, other relevant health practitioners caring for the pregnant worker as well as employers.

In the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we support RANZCOG's recommendation that, "where possible, pregnant health care workers be allocated to patients, and duties that have reduced exposure to patients with, or suspected to have, COVID-19 infection" and that "all personnel should observe strict hygiene protocols and have full access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)".^{8,9} We also support RANZCOG's statement that "urges employers to be sensitive to the fact that pregnant women are, appropriately, often anxious about their own health and protective of their unborn baby" and that employers should consider reallocation to lower-risk duties, working from home or leave of absence."¹⁰

Respond to changing circumstances

Information about the COVID-19 pandemic changes rapidly. It is vital that employers and clinical leads remain up-to-date and access timely and accurate health advice from trusted sources such as those listed at the end of this document.

There must be clear communication between all levels of the organisation with consistent information. Employers and clinical leaders in health care must adapt to the changing circumstances and show compassion to and reassure pregnant women under trying and unpredictable circumstances. This will be vital in the future as further widespread disruption will occur and at this stage there is no clear evidence as to how long that disruption will continue. Advice may be sought from specialist occupational and environmental physicians when appropriate.

Authority

The information has been provided by specialist occupational and environmental physicians from the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (AFOEM) of The Royal Australian College of Physicians (RACP). The advice has been reviewed and endorsed by the COVID-19 Expert Clinical Reference Group of the RACP which includes specialists in infectious disease, respiratory medicine, geriatrics, public health and occupational and environmental medicine.

Feedback

Comments, questions or feedback may be emailed to afodem@racp.edu.au. Please include the word *COVID-19* in the subject line of any emails.

⁸ The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (25 March 2020), COVID-19 and pregnant health care workers and other at-risk workers: <https://ranzocog.edu.au/news/covid-19-and-pregnant-health-care-workers>

⁹ For information on which PPE to use and how to use it, please refer to advice from the Australian Department of Health: <https://www.health.gov.au/news/australian-health-protection-principal-committee-ahppc-coronavirus-covid-19-statements-on-24-april-2020#statement-on-the-use-of-ppe-in-hospital-with-patients-with-covid19> and <https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020/04/guidance-on-the-use-of-personal-protective-equipment-ppe-in-hospitals-during-the-covid-19-outbreak.pdf> and to the Aotearoa New Zealand Ministry of Health website page on Personal protective equipment use in health care: <https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-novel-coronavirus-information-specific-audiences/covid-19-advice-essential-workers-including-personal-protective-equipment/personal-protective-equipment-use-health-care>

¹⁰ The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (25 March 2020), COVID-19 and pregnant health care workers and other at-risk workers: <https://ranzocog.edu.au/news/covid-19-and-pregnant-health-care-workers>

It is important to access timely and accurate health advice from trusted sources such as those listed below.

Trusted sources of information on COVID-19

Australia-specific

Australian Department of Health website for all the latest news from the Australian Department of Health including Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) Advice to National Cabinet: <https://www.health.gov.au/news>.

Australian Government website - This site is regularly updated to give you the latest Coronavirus news, updates and advice from government agencies across Australia
<https://www.australia.gov.au/>

Australian Government, Department of Health (April 2020), *Guidance on the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) in hospitals during the COVID-19 outbreak*:
<https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020/04/guidance-on-the-use-of-personal-protective-equipment-ppe-in-hospitals-during-the-covid-19-outbreak.pdf>

In Australia, call the Australian Government's Coronavirus Health Information Line if you are seeking information on coronavirus (COVID-19). The line operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week: 1800 020 080.

Aotearoa New Zealand-specific

Aotearoa New Zealand Ministry of Health official advice and resources:
<https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus>

Aotearoa New Zealand Government advice and resources including information and government helpline phone numbers for COVID-19 assistance and general inquiries:
<https://covid19.govt.nz/>

In Aotearoa New Zealand, if you are unwell and need COVID-19 health advice, call the Aotearoa New Zealand COVID Healthline (for free) on 0800 358 5453 or +64 9 358 5453 for international SIMS.

Advice to pregnant women, pregnant healthcare workers and at-risk workers from The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists

Coronavirus (COVID-19) A message for pregnant women and their families:
<https://ranzcog.edu.au/statements-guidelines/covid-19-statement>

COVID-19 and pregnant health care workers and other at-risk workers:
<https://ranzcog.edu.au/news/covid-19-and-pregnant-health-care-workers>