

The Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System (PRAMS) is a survey of women who recently gave birth. PRAMS asks about their experiences, behaviors and health care utilization before, during and shortly after their pregnancy. Women receive the survey two to six months after giving birth. Vermont has participated in PRAMS since 2001.

The purpose of PRAMS is to provide quantitative estimates of health experiences and behaviors around pregnancy. In addition, the PRAMS questionnaire provides space for respondents to add additional comments about their experiences and their thoughts about the health of mothers and babies. Respondents sometimes add additional comments in response to specific survey questions.

This report highlights comments contributed by Vermont PRAMS respondents who have given birth during the COVID-19 pandemic.

These comments were offered by respondents and not specifically solicited by Vermont PRAMS. They have been edited for clarity, typographic consistency, and, when needed, confidentiality.

Note that Vermont PRAMS added a COVID-19 survey supplement in October 2020, with specific new questions about how COVID-19 has affected prenatal, delivery and postpartum care and other experiences. Results of these questions will be available for analysis at a future date.

## Mental Health and Overall Wellbeing

For many women, COVID-19 has exacerbated the stress that can come with being a new parent. As one respondent perceptively observed, it can be hard to identify causes of distress in the contexts of a new child and a pandemic:

“It was definitely an interesting experience being pregnant and giving birth during a pandemic. Not sure if any mild depression I had was from pregnancy or pandemic. Postpartum [depression] is definitely a real thing- I am just unsure of what this was”

Multiple respondents noted that the pandemic is likely to affect many mothers’ mental health:

“[Responding to question about depression symptoms:] It’s difficult because of COVID.”

“I wonder what these answers [to depression questions] will look like because of COVID.”

Several comments also alluded to the difficulty in getting support from others during a pandemic:

“COVID made it very difficult for support for my husband and me. Scary time.”

“I haven’t been able to access... my support network because of COVID.”

“It has been emotionally hard and isolating.”

### KEY POINTS

- **Comments from PRAMS respondents highlight how COVID-19 has affected mental health, health care, delivery planning, breastfeeding and work.**
- **Vermont PRAMS recently added a COVID-19 supplement to the PRAMS survey.**

### Effects on Medical Visits and Preventive Health

Many commenters reported that they experienced disruptions to their delivery plans and in attending health care and other appointments. Several PRAMS respondents who had hoped to attend prenatal classes on childbirth were unable to do so, though one respondent mentioned participation in a virtual birth class.

“Coronavirus made it difficult to attend all the prenatal classes I wanted before delivery, but I was able to participate in a virtual birth class. I did not attend a six-month cleaning at the dentist in April due to Coronavirus.”

“[Postpartum visit] was via phone because of COVID-19— I never actually saw someone.”

While several cited telemedicine as enabling them to have some post-partum visits, one found the shift to telemedicine difficult:

“I gave birth right as COVID-19 was hitting the US. It has made it a little more difficult with all post-partum and lactation appointments on video tele-medicine.”

Multiple respondents reported that they missed or delayed planned vaccinations and dental visits:

“I was supposed to [get the Tdap vaccine] but because of COVID-19 did not.”

“Post-partum care has been challenging because of COVID-19. For me, I haven't been able to access needed doctor's visits (dental, PT, etc.,) and my support network.”

### Hospital Experiences During Covid-19

While many respondents credited their health care providers with helping them manage the difficulties of pregnancy, delivery and infant care during a pandemic, many felt that hospital visitor restrictions had a negative impact. Respondents had diverse experiences with how hospitals attempted to reduce the risks of COVID-19 transmission:

“The hospital was fairly strict during the pandemic, too strict with the policy about father being in the room. It was a struggle.”

“That hospital and the birthing center got a 10 out of 10 for me and my husband. They took care of me, my baby and my husband's needs during our stay. They were very cautious and helpful because I did give birth in March at the beginning of COVID-19.”

“[Respondent's infant] stayed in the NICU for 15 days. I was able to stay nearby, but during COVID-19 there was push back from staff [about] being able to enter or return to the hospital everyday.”

Social distancing has made it challenging for many Vermont moms to have the delivery and postpartum experiences they were hoping for:

“COVID-19 messed up a lot. I was very nervous to deliver my baby in a hospital [during] the spread of this disease. Thankfully the hospital made the experience as best as they could. Unfortunately, [other family members] were diagnosed with COVID-19 a month before.”

“Was told I could not go into my [postpartum visit] appointment when I got there because I had my four-day old breastfeeding baby with me!!”

## Impact on Breastfeeding

Respondents were unable to attend breastfeeding classes that they had planned to attend:

“[Breastfeeding] classes weren't happening because of COVID. I wanted to breastfeed my baby for as long as he wanted but my milk didn't come in fully so I wasn't able to.”

A respondent who had to be readmitted to the hospital during the pandemic was unable to have her baby with her while in the hospital, which complicated her breastfeeding plans:

“With COVID, just after I delivered I had to get readmitted twice for hypertension and couldn't take her with me or have anyone else come with me, which led to pumping around the clock and not having her latching.”

Respondents did identify providers and other support, such as Vermont Department of Health WIC staff, as supportive of breastfeeding at a challenging time:

“During this COVID-19, [what] a scary time for mothers. WIC has a great breastfeeding counsellor. We live in a great area with much support!”

## Work Issues

Respondents reported experiences of layoffs and “much longer than expected” periods of maternity leave, such as five or six months. One who delivered early in the pandemic reported that what was intended to be a six-week maternity leave became a COVID-19 layoff.

“[In response to survey question about having access to paid leave:] No, I was laid off because of the pandemic, I hope to go back. It was supposed to be six weeks [off from work] but then the pandemic began.”

Some reported uncertainty about when they may return to work:

“Out [on leave] until COVID-19 blows over. I'll probably return in six months.”

One respondent who delivered early in the pandemic reported that what initially seemed like too little time with her newborn became, after a COVID-19 related layoff, too much time away from work. Another respondent mentioned that she was able to work remotely for a time and save some of her leave time for this fall, but others found the situation less accommodating:

“I ended up going back on state assistance due to not being able to go back to work, and my work ended up laying me off due to having to stay home and tend to my children.”

## Key Takeaways

Vermont PRAMS continues to receive comments about COVID-19, and began systematically collecting COVID-19 survey data in October 2020. Vermont PRAMS will be able to monitor how health care, mental health and social support may have been affected by the pandemic. Vermont PRAMS thanks respondents for sharing their thoughts and experiences.

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**PRAMS respondents identified several ways COVID-19 has affected pregnancy, delivery and the postpartum period.**