

# Study: Prenatal Care Visits Didn't Increase Risk for COVID-19

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## Sharon C. Reale, MD

Contributor: Sharon C. Reale, MD

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While some patients have benefited from virtual visits during the COVID-19 pandemic, pregnant patients are a unique group. Many require multiple, in-person visits for measurements, exams and lab tests to ensure the health of the mother and baby.

Prior to the release of a recent study from Brigham and Women's Hospital, it wasn't clear whether coming to the hospital for in-person health visits increased a pregnant woman's risk for COVID-19 infection. The Brigham-led study, published in the medical journal JAMA, found that in-person health care visits among pregnant patients didn't increase the risk of getting COVID-19.

“Our study should help reassure pregnant patients that when they come to the hospital for appointments, they aren't substantially increasing their risk of infection,” says Sharon Reale, MD, a Brigham anesthesiologist who led the study. “As a mother myself, I completely understand the desire to protect yourself and your baby. I hope our study will help patients realize that the safest thing for them and their babies is to visit their doctor and get the care they need.”

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## Number of In-Person Visits Not Tied to Infection Risk

To conduct the study, Dr. Reale and colleagues at the Brigham collaborated with four hospitals in the Mass General Brigham (MGB) system to examine the medical records of 3,000 pregnant women during the spring of 2020. At the time, the Boston area was experiencing a surge in COVID-19 cases. The MGB system was conducting universal testing among all pregnant patients at the time of admission for SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

Of the nearly 3,000 women who gave birth from mid-April to late June, 111 patients tested

positive. On average, the patients who tested positive for COVID-19 attended 3.1 visits in person (with a range of 0 to 10 visits); patients who tested negative attended an average of 3.3 visits in person (with a range of 0 to 16 visits). The authors conclude that there was no meaningful association between in-person visits and infection among the patients studied.

According to Dr. Reale, these results may have been driven in part by the hospitals' comprehensive approach to preventing the spread of COVID-19. The Brigham implemented a wide variety of safety measures to provide the safest possible environment, including daily screening of all employees, patients and visitors for symptoms. This spring, the Brigham also implemented a universal masking policy for all patients and providers. This masking policy was proven to dramatically lower transmission rates in a recent study led by the Brigham.

We now have important evidence that shows that in-person health care for pregnant patients didn't affect risk of infection. This should help reassure the public and show that necessary care should be done and can be done safely at the Brigham.

## Seeking Prenatal Care During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The Brigham investigators note that the study's patient population included pregnant patients but that their results might extend to other patients. Many patients have been avoiding necessary medical care because they're afraid of contracting the disease in a health care setting.

“Our study provides important evidence that in-person health care for pregnant patients didn't affect risk of infection, and we have every reason to think that our findings translate to other patient populations,” says Dr. Reale. “This should help reassure the public and show that necessary care should be done and can be done safely at the Brigham.”

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