

Abstract

Background: Regular physical activity during pregnancy can decrease the likelihood of excessive gestational weight gain (GWG) and postpartum weight retention. It can improve one's mood, decrease depression and stress levels, enhance psychological wellbeing, reduce the risk of gestational diabetes, pre-eclampsia, caesarean deliveries and lumbar pain. Women perceive a healthy lifestyle as beneficial for their children, making pregnancy an opportune time to discuss healthy living. As the interest in participating in sport activities and being active is increasing, so is the question on safety of exercise in general and during pregnancy for both mother and foetus. Therefore, the aim of this master's dissertation study was to determine the attitudes and beliefs that pregnant women and midwives have towards physical activity during pregnancy.

Methods: This study used a qualitative study design, conducting one-on-one interviews and focus group discussions, virtually or in-person during the early phases of the Covid-19 lockdown measures. Two population groups of interest were included in the study. The first included qualified midwives with experience providing care and support to expecting women and, the second included pregnant women. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling and, interviews were conducted between 01 December 2020 and 30 March 2021. The interviews took approximately 30 minutes. All discussions were audio taped after obtaining permission from participants and then transcribed verbatim by a commercial transcription service. A deductive logic approach within the theory of planned behaviour was used. All focus groups were conducted in English. Data were analysed and coded by the use of MAXQDA software, placed into a table format to identify relevance, and divided into themes and sub-themes.

Results: The midwives had a mean age of 43 (29-60) years and a mean of 15 (1-36) years active as a midwife. The pregnant women had a mean age of 27 (21-33) years and a mean BMI of 26 kg/m² (20.86 - 34.2 kg/m²). The pregnant women had a mean gestational age of 17 weeks (12 – 28) weeks. Physical activity was seen as beneficial for a healthy pregnancy by both groups. Major barriers to exercise during pregnancy included; transport, location and time. The midwives were perceived to lack knowledge on the safety of exercises, weight gain during pregnancy and types of exercises that can be done by the pregnant women. This leads to the distrust in midwives and their knowledge which leads to a decrease in a pregnant women's adherence to physical activity. The midwives perceived their midwifery curriculum lacked information regarding physical activity during pregnancy and would find it beneficial if it were added into future midwifery programmes.

Conclusions: The findings of this study indicate that there is a clear need for education programmes on the benefits of physical activity during pregnancy in the community and amongst midwives employed in private hospitals. Further investigation is required to develop interventions that target barriers to physical activity and exercise during pregnancy and to support adherence to exercise programmes

Keywords: Benefits of exercise during pregnancy; Barriers to exercise; Enablers to exercise; Health care workers; Types of exercises