



Pregnancy Experiences of Deaf People

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May 2023

Introduction

Note: Why do we use “Deaf” and not “deaf”?

In this research summary, we use the word “Deaf,” spelled with a capital “D.” This is because our research study participants, the people we interviewed, all use ASL (American Sign Language) to communicate.

Sometimes it is hard for Deaf patients to get good healthcare. Often doctors are not good at communicating with Deaf patients. Because of this, Deaf people get worse healthcare. Deaf people are often not happy with their healthcare. They sometimes get worse treatment when they go to the doctor than do people who are not Deaf.

Deaf patients often need different ways to communicate with doctors. One way to communicate is with a sign language interpreter. Sign language interpreters can help Deaf patients get better healthcare. Sign language interpreters are not always perfect. Interpreters can be in-person at the doctor’s office. They can also work virtually through a screen from far away. Even with an interpreter, it can be hard to communicate with the doctors.

Pregnancy healthcare can be worse for Deaf patients. Deaf pregnant patients get less information from their doctors. They also see doctors less often.



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Many Deaf pregnant patients say they avoid the doctor because of difficult communication.

They would go to the doctor more if it were easier to communicate. Deaf pregnant patients are more likely to have problems during their pregnancy or birth. We do not know why. One reason could be because of difficult communication.



We wanted to know more about what healthcare is like for pregnant Deaf people. We interviewed 45 Deaf people who had a baby. The interviews were in American Sign Language (ASL). We asked them questions about healthcare during pregnancy. Then we looked at what they said to find ways to make care better.

What We Found

1. Getting an Interpreter

One barrier to good healthcare is communication. Many Deaf people like to communicate with an interpreter in-person.

Hospitals don't always give Deaf patients in-person interpreters. Sometimes they give a remote (video screen) interpreter instead, but there are many problems for Deaf people with that type of interpreter. Without an in-person

interpreter, Deaf patients often can't understand what their doctors are saying. Without an in-person interpreter, doctors often can't understand what Deaf patients need. Many Deaf patients don't like other ways of communicating.

One thing that helps with communication is accommodations. Doctors can accommodate Deaf patients by hiring interpreters. Deaf patients feel accepted when doctors hire an interpreter. Deaf patients are more likely to have a good experience when they feel accepted.

2. Patients Feeling Unhappy About Communication

Many Deaf patients are unhappy with the communication they have with their doctors. Doctors don't always give Deaf patients the information they need. Many doctors do not tell Deaf patients what they want to know. This can lead to bad health for Deaf patients.

One thing that helps is when doctors give Deaf patients the information they want. Many Deaf patients like it when doctors spend enough time with them.

3. Support From Doctors

Many Deaf people said it is difficult to find doctors who can support them. One thing that helps support Deaf patients is having a larger healthcare team. Many Deaf patients are happier when they have good interpreters. They also are happier if there are people there who can support them with their emotions.

4. Self-Advocacy

Many Deaf people said it was important for Deaf patients to stand up for themselves. Deaf patients often need to ask for their interpreters. They need to find information on their own. This extra work can be tiring and isn't fair.

What We Learned

We learned there are many issues that stop Deaf patients from getting good healthcare.

1. Bad communication with doctors
2. Lack of healthcare information in ASL
3. Few doctors who communicate well with Deaf people

Participants told us how they get information about pregnancy. Many times, they get information from other people who use ASL. They feel their healthcare is better when they have an interpreter.

Doctors can give better healthcare to Deaf patients by:

- Giving Deaf patients in-person interpreters if they want one
- Communicating well with their patients and in ways that are best for their patients
- Providing more information in ASL

When doctors treat Deaf patients well, it makes their healthcare better.

What Changes Are Needed?

How policy can make pregnancy healthcare better for Deaf people:

- There are laws that help Deaf people get better healthcare. These laws don't always help enough. Laws and policies should be improved so they support better communication and access to healthcare and other related services for Deaf people.
- Healthcare workers should have training to care for Deaf patients.

We Learned That Doctors Could Improve Pregnancy Experiences for Deaf People *If They*

- Offer an in-person ASL interpreter to Deaf people who want one
- Communicate well with their patients
- Provide more healthcare information in ASL

What's Needed?

- Our current laws to help Deaf people need to be made stronger
- Doctors and other healthcare workers should be trained in working with Deaf people

Credit

Adapted from “Experiences of Pregnancy and Perinatal Healthcare Access of Women who are Deaf: A Qualitative Study,” by T. L. Panko, J. Cuculick, S. Albert, L. D. Smith, M. M. Cooley, M. Herschel, M. Mitra, and M. McKee, 2023, *BJOG*, 130(5), pp. 514–521 (<https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-0528.17300>).

Funding

Research reported in this publication was supported by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health & Human Development of the National Institutes of Health under Award Number R01HD090103. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health.

How to Cite This Brief

Lerner, M. (2023). Pregnancy Experiences of Deaf People. National Center for Disability and Pregnancy Research, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA.

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