WOMEN'S AND CHILDREN'S HEALTH
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A family embracing maternity health as part of a health promotion campaign in Myanmar.
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Engaging men in reproductive, maternal and newborn health

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Key messages

- There is evidence from many countries that expectant fathers want to be more involved and to know how to protect the health of their family.
- Men influence the health of their female partners and children.
- Including men in maternal and newborn health services has benefits relating to health behaviours and service utilisation.
- Strategies to engage men can be simple, relatively inexpensive and implemented in a variety of settings.
- Involve men and women in the design of programs, test messages carefully and encourage shared decision-making and women's autonomy.
- Efforts to engage expectant fathers should be part of wider efforts to provide information to others who influence decisions about pregnancy and childbirth and newborn care, including older women, and other family and community members.

Pregnancy, childbirth and caring for newborns are viewed as 'women's business' in many cultures. Maternal and child health care services have focused on providing information and services to women. Yet men's behaviour and decisions affect the health of their wives and babies. To support and protect the health and wellbeing of their family men need, and have a right to information and health care services.

Despite international agreement on the importance of including men in maternal and newborn health progress has been slow.[1-3] We undertook a review to identify potential benefits, challenges and strategies for engaging men in services that improve maternal and newborn health in low-income settings.[4]

Benefits of including men in maternal and child health

Studies in many settings show that the support of their male partners influences women's uptake of services, their workload, nutrition and wellbeing during pregnancy, and the ways they care for and feed their babies. Women are vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections and HIV infection during and after pregnancy. So there are many potential benefits to reaching expectant fathers with information and services. There have been few intervention studies that aim to engage men in maternal and child health, but available evidence demonstrates:

- increased use of family planning and contraceptives in long-term couples;
- reduced workload for women during pregnancy;
- improved preparation for birth;
- improved couple communication and emotional support for women during pregnancy;
- increased uptake of interventions to prevent syphilis and HIV infection in children; and
- increased attendance at postnatal care.[4,5]

Strategies for engaging men

Different strategies to reach men with information and services will be appropriate in different contexts.

Antenatal visits provide an opportunity to engage expectant fathers. Maternal nutrition, workload and preparing for the birth can be discussed with both partners together. Much can be done to make antenatal clinics more welcoming to expectant fathers. Maternal health care providers need training, guidelines for a couple antenatal visit, and information materials for men. Clinic hours can be adjusted to make it easier for expectant fathers to attend, for example, there might be an evening clinic once a week. Separate waiting spaces and men's health promotion posters will make men feel more welcome. And including an indicator on the couple visit in Health Information Systems will allow clinics to monitor male involvement. The presence of men in the clinic highlights the need to improve arrangements for privacy and confidentiality. These are often neglected issues of great importance to pregnant women too.

If the second antenatal visit becomes a routine couple visit, women have an opportunity to choose whether to have their partner attend. It is important to try to avoid unintentionally discouraging single or unaccompanied women from accessing services.

While some topics can be discussed with a woman and her partner together, it is better to discuss sensitive subjects such as the safety of sex during and after the pregnancy, the need to avoid unprotected sex with someone else, and HIV and STI testing, in separate single-sex groups. This could be undertaken by trained male staff at or near the clinic,[6] or in separate meetings for expectant fathers in a culturally appropriate community or workplace setting.

Community beliefs that discourage male involvement in maternal and newborn health can change. Mass media strategies that appeal to men's sense of responsibility for protecting their family should be integrated with community outreach and peer education. These should aim to reach men, women, traditional midwives, community and religious leaders.[7] Boys and men can be reached at different stages of life – at school, when preparing for marriage, expecting a baby, and as fathers and grandfathers. Efforts to involve men are more likely to succeed if they focus on men's concerns about their own health as well as the health of their family.

To reduce risk of any possible negative consequences of involving men it is important to involve women in the development of strategies to engage men. Encourage shared decision-making and women's autonomy.

Conclusion

The need for further research and evaluation of strategies to engage men in improving maternal and child health should not delay action. Previous research provides a strong rationale for engaging men, while studies examined in this review provide evidence of benefits of male involvement on some maternal and newborn health indicators, and examples of effective strategies for including men that can be implemented and evaluated in new settings. Men have a right to the information and services they need to protect their own and their families' health.

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