



The importance of home birth during Covid-19

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My lockdown experience so far hasn't been too bad. I'm fortunate to live in a rural town in the South West, which is the region which has taken the least hit. I put this down in part to the attitude of the people, most of whom have been pretty good at following the lockdown. We're fortunate enough also to have a nice big garden and already live the kind of lifestyle where we grow our own and cook from scratch as much as possible, so always have well-stocked cupboards, and we keep chickens so have always had a consistent supply of eggs. So the food shortages in the supermarket and everyone's panic buying didn't worry us too much.

The weather has been kind, which means my husband and I have been spending a lot of time in the garden, which has certainly been incredibly good for our mental health. To be honest we are both home birds anyway, so the reality of being cooped up together for weeks on end has actually mostly been quite pleasant. We were also lucky to have got married in a very small ceremony the weekend before Covid-19 hit the UK so we were able to see our three best friends and closest family all together, which has made

the absence a lot easier – not that it's been easy, we are used to seeing my husband's parents almost every weekend, so he in particular has been finding it very tough.

The thing I was most worried about at the start of lockdown was missing out on those third trimester 'rites of passage' such as antenatal classes. Fortunately, my NCT classes and my pregnancy yoga have been moved online so we are still able to make those social connections, if only virtually. Medically, the quantity of my midwife appointments has reduced as I'm considered 'low risk' and have so far had a very textbook pregnancy. My midwife decided this was the right course of action for our safety, and I'm grateful for that. Although there are some days when I have a bit of a 'wobble' and I wish I had the reassurance of more regular appointments.

I've always planned a home birth as I believe very firmly that 'birth isn't a medical emergency unless it is' and know without doubt that I will labour most efficiently in my little nest. I'm no fan of hospitals and as I mentioned earlier, I'm a home bird through and through. I'm in an NHS trust that is very supportive of home birth and have been lucky enough to have the same midwife since my 8-week booking appointment – she has been fully behind my home birth plan from Day 1. Where some trusts around the country have been suspending home birth services and closing MLUs, mine has been fighting tooth and nail to keep these services open for their mothers. For me, this means that even if the situation worsens in the next few weeks and a home birth isn't possible, I should still be able to access the 'next best thing' of the freestanding MLU – still a far better alternative than hospital for me.

I was already scared of birthing in hospital yet given the situation the prospect scares me even more. Firstly, the fear of contracting Covid-19 whilst in hospital, and secondly, the fear of birthing without my husband's support if my trust had stopped partners being with women. We are a very close couple and I know it would break his heart as well as mine for him to miss the birth or be told he needs to leave right after (especially as I feel I would need him for emotional support 100 times more in a hospital setting). We've been working really hard using hypnobirthing techniques to keep positive and calm as we know that's what is best for me and baby. I know a lot of women have considered freebirthing where home birth has been suspended and, admittedly, the thought crossed my mind briefly, before I realised that the 'what ifs' would make me almost as anxious as having to go to hospital. Perhaps if this weren't my first baby the option may have seemed more appealing. Fortunately, at the moment, home birth with a midwife is still very much on the cards. I know that, were I to be told I wasn't 'allowed' a home birth or I had to go to hospital, my mental state would be a lot more fragile than it currently is – I'm so scared of hospitals that I know my adrenaline would be far too high to have the physiological, natural birth that is so important to me.

When this all started there was a period of uncertainty for a few weeks where labour went from being something I was really looking forward to, to something I was terrified of. Being told my home birth should be able to proceed meant I am now able to look forward to it again. I feel very fortunate that I've never had to justify my home birth plan to my midwife – she knows it's right for me, she knows it's important, and I know she will do everything in her power to make it happen. I see so many women who

are having to fight their healthcare providers who don't value home birth and I know this is potluck of living in an area with a very pro-home birth hospital trust.

There is no doubt my mental health has taken a hit from this – I think I'd be mad if it hadn't. Being heavily pregnant for the first time is scary enough – being heavily pregnant when it feels the world is falling apart is just that little bit scarier. I'm very sad that our parents won't get to meet their first grandchild for no idea how long, and I'm anxious about the world we are bringing our son into, but so far I'm managing to remain relatively positive despite the huge number and weight of uncertainties