

# Health professionals in preventing STIs in pregnant women: an integrative review

Maria Fernanda Carvalho Martins Moreira <sup>a</sup>, Fernanda Silva Carvalho <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Faculdade de Medicina, Escola Bahiana de Medicina e Saúde Pública, Salvador, Bahia, Brasil, mfcmartinsm@gmail.com.

<sup>b</sup> Faculdade de Medicina, Universidade Salvador, Salvador, Bahia, Brasil, fgananda@hotmail.com.

**Abstract.** Pregnancy is a physiological period that, in most cases, occurs without complications. However, when Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) are involved, gestational changes can alter the course of these infectious diseases. Prenatal care aims to ensure a healthy pregnancy through preventive health education actions. This literature review aims to highlight the importance of healthcare professionals in the prevention of STIs in pregnant women. This study is an integrative literature review based on a bibliographic search in the Lilacs/BVS database and Google Scholar. Five articles were selected, two from the Lilacs database and three from Google Scholar. The five articles used for discussion in this review explicitly the importance of health education in a care-oriented environment, a place equipped with healthcare professionals, who disseminate health information to promote well-being and prevent Sexually Transmitted Infections. In summary, all the information shared by healthcare professionals with pregnant women is a crucial part of the care process. This study also demonstrated that health education is a key tool in STI prevention, serving as a direct strategy for raising awareness between healthcare providers and the community. Additionally, there is a lack in literature emphasizing the role of each health specialty in promoting STI prevention, which is essential for enhancing health promotion strategies.

**Keywords.** Health education, Healthcare professionals, Pregnant woman, Prenatal care, Sexually transmitted infections, STIs.

## 1. Introduction

Pregnancy is a physiological time that, in most cases, occurs without complications [1]. However, in a portion of pregnant women, carrying a disease can lead to an unfavorable outcome for both the fetus and the mother [1]. In the case of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), gestational changes such as immunosuppression and hormonal changes can alter the course of these infectious diseases [2].

Prenatal care, in this sense, aims to ensure the healthy development of pregnancy through preventive actions [3]. Studies have shown that qualified prenatal care has led to a reduction in negative perinatal outcomes, such as preterm birth and low birth weight [3,4].

In this context, risk factors prevention, detection, and early intervention constitute this network of adequate prenatal care [5]. Despite maternal and child health monitoring being part of the Brazilian Primary Health Care network, concerns about the

quality of women's health care in Brazil persist [1]. Regarding STIs, there were over 35,000 cases of gestational syphilis and approximately 26,000 cases of congenital syphilis reported in the Brazilian population [1].

Strategies to improve these indicators highlight the importance of continuous reinforcement by the professionals involved [1]. Therefore, the health team should aim, within the prenatal context, for the health of both the pregnant woman and the child, encompassing disease prevention according to the National Primary Care Policy [3]. It is also worth noting that each health professional has its specificities in the care of pregnant women and, through the union of different knowledge, there are benefits observed in the care of this public [3]. Despite the prominent role of healthcare professionals, there are no studies emphasizing their effectiveness in raising awareness among pregnant women about Sexually Transmitted Infections.

This literature review aims to emphasize the importance of healthcare professionals in preventing STIs in pregnant women, involving the entire healthcare team, whether in the Brazilian context or in the impact of health education by professionals regardless of their nationality.

## 2. Methodology

This study is an integrative literature review based on a bibliographic search in the Lilacs/BVS and Google Scholar databases. The keywords used were: "prenatal care", "prevention", "detection", "treatment", "STI", "STIs", and "SUS" (Brazilian Unified Health System). The selected studies included articles published in English, Portuguese or Spanish in the last 10 years (2014-2023).

The excluded studies were incomplete articles, not related to the theme studies and those focusing on a specific STI. The selected files were downloaded, and, subsequently, the main topics related to the theme were studied and highlighted.

## 3. Results

Five articles were selected, two from the Lilacs database and three from Google Scholar. Among them, 2 articles have an exploratory approach that was based on interviews about knowledge of STIs [6,7]. While one focuses the research question on pregnant women [6], the other restricts the study to postpartum women [7].

Two articles analyze the implementation of health education in primary health care, discussing the results of implementing sexual and reproductive health education [8], and analyzing the importance of knowledge transmission as a family health strategy [9]. Finally, a study was selected on health education as a tool in the prevention of STIs [10].

All articles focused on the theme of health education, its importance in disease prevention and social well-being and the role of healthcare professionals in the health promotion in addition to preventing health diseases [6-10].

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 Pregnant women's knowledge about sexually transmitted infections

Reproductive planning serves as a crucial tool in shaping health interventions aimed at preventing STIs. During prenatal care, there is significant emphasis on educating pregnant women about its importance, not only for preventing infections but also for promoting safe sexual practices. The World Health Organization (WHO) highlights the imperative of integrating this health planning into prenatal care [11].

Mouta et al. [6] point out that in their research with

pregnant women, participants had knowledge about Sexually Transmitted Infections but did not apply it to their own circumstances. All participants in the same study reported not receiving any guidance on the subject during prenatal care and instead gained more information about infection prevention from social media [6]. This highlights that the healthcare team's strategy should focus on negotiation, particularly during the prenatal period, regarding contraceptive methods and guidance on information found on the internet.

Another study reveals that postpartum women's knowledge about STIs was insufficient [7]. Furthermore, it indicates that these women sought information independently and did not receive guidance during prenatal care [7]. Thus, it is clear that the information acquired by pregnant women may not adequately support effective infection prevention, so prenatal care from healthcare professionals in educating about this issue could be essential for improving prevention.

### 4.2 The importance of health education

Health education is defined as a series of health initiatives designed to enhance individuals' autonomy in self-care [12]. Among these initiatives is sexual and reproductive health, which involves counseling and educational activities spanning from prenatal care through childbirth and the postpartum period [8]. This field, in addition to addressing various topics, emphasizes the humanized care of sexually transmitted infections [8]. This approach can be adapted to fit the needs of the population and the daily routines of multidisciplinary teams.

In an experimental study that analyzed the implementation of health education in a Primary Health Care Unit, it was found that primary care maintains close contact with the community [9]. Moreover, this connection between primary care and the community, along with health promotion activities, is considered a strategy for promoting health and preventing diseases [9]. Therefore, health education developed in primary care settings, focusing on the prevention of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), represents a deliberate choice in safeguarding pregnant women's health against these infections.

### 4.3 The role of healthcare professionals

The five articles used for discussion in this review explicitly, albeit some in indirectly way, the importance of health education in a care-oriented environment, a place equipped with healthcare professionals who disseminate health information to promote well-being and prevent Sexually Transmitted Infections [6-10]. This underscores the necessity of healthcare professionals' involvement in health education to establish a reliable source of information on prevention, detection, and treatment

of STIs during pregnancy.

Healthcare professionals, as holders of the knowledge to be disseminated, must ethically serve the population by facilitating and organizing access to sexual and reproductive health care services, including their involvement in prenatal care [9]. For example, Arrosi et al. [7] explicitly highlight that the nurse's role in STI prevention is multifaceted, involving the implementation of preventive measures for the community and serving as the primary contact for pregnant women during prenatal tests. Therefore, healthcare professionals should provide support and take proactive steps to facilitate measures aimed at controlling STIs among pregnant women.

Healthcare professionals can also achieve the goal of health education with the help of the population. A study conducted in a family health unit reported that professionals in this healthcare setting emphasized the importance of local users in managing health services [10]. Therefore, active methodologies serve as a tool to shape the profile of population and integrate workers as promoters of knowledge [10].

Therefore, it is important to train healthcare professionals to enable them to foster the use of guiding questions [10]. This qualification enhances their ability to care for pregnant women in infection prevention. Consequently, prenatal education initiatives serve as a timely opportunity for professionals to raise awareness among women about protective measures against STIs and, most importantly, empower them to make informed and safe choices [6].

## 5. Conclusion

All information provided by healthcare professionals to pregnant women plays a crucial role in the care process, ensuring a safe and reliable environment for health education [3]. Addressing the concerns and uncertainties of pregnant women helps facilitate a low-risk pregnancy for both the mother and the neonate [3]. Therefore, the prevention and screening of STIs are essential for early diagnosis and better therapeutic outcomes [2].

This integrative review showed that, despite pregnant women having some prior knowledge about STIs, the most reliable information should come from healthcare professionals. The review revealed that some of the women's existing beliefs about the content and prevention methods for sexually transmitted infections were incorrect. Thus, it is important to address and discuss this prior knowledge with a professional during prenatal care.

This study also demonstrated that health education is a key tool in STI prevention, serving as a direct strategy for raising awareness between healthcare

providers and the community. This approach can address various health issues, including the health of both the pregnant woman and her partner in preventing STIs during pregnancy [3]. Furthermore, it helps build a network for disease prevention.

The healthcare professional plays a pivotal role in this context as a trusted source of information. Their role is multifaceted and therefore requires specialized training in health education techniques. When effectively applied during prenatal consultations, this approach empowers women to make informed and safe decisions.

In conclusion, further research is needed to investigate the reasons behind gaps in STI prevention knowledge and the lack of adequate prenatal care. Additionally, understanding the role of each healthcare specialty in promoting STI prevention is crucial for developing effective health promotion strategies.

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