

5 April 2022 -- New mothers in Syria say an initiative introduced by WHO to ensure that expectant Syrian mothers experience a safe, healthy pregnancy – followed by a safe, successful birth – represents the first time they feel ‘cared for’.

The Caring For The Newborn At Home initiative guides Syrian mothers through the steps they and their families can take to ensure their newborn babies have a healthy start in life. Under the new initiative, WHO-trained community health workers make individual home visits to support mothers during pregnancy, and after childbirth, teaching women skills including how to breastfeed and keep their babies warm.

New mother Fathyah, from Homs, says that she is very happy to be part of the initiative. "Unlike during my previous pregnancies, health care workers have been visiting me at home to help me take care of my baby," she explains. "I've learned so much, including how important it is to begin breastfeeding within half an hour of birth."

"For the first time since the conflict began, I feel that there are people who really care about me and my family," Fathyah adds.

Decades of war have desecrated public health systems in Syria, where pregnancy and birth can be a particularly traumatic experience for women living in the country's many conflict-affected or insecure environments, and the majority of maternal and newborn deaths occur during the delivery of the baby, or within 24 hours of birth.

"Although pregnant women normally receive antenatal care, the equally important period following birth is sometimes neglected," said Elizabeth Hoff, then WHO Representative in Syria. "Syria is one of the first countries in the Region to implement this WHO programme."

The initiative is initially being introduced in areas of Syria that are newly reconciled, or where there is limited access to health care, aiming to reach 10 000 beneficiaries per year. Some 12 358 home visits were conducted in 2019 in nearly 11 governorates, and 11 884 visits were carried out in 2020. It is hoped that the WHO programme will help families adopt appropriate home care practices, guided by specialist-trained, skilled community health workers.

“This training will help educate Syrian mothers and eliminate potentially harmful practice,” says Fatima, a community health worker from Homs. “After years of turmoil affecting access to health care for pregnant women and mothers, an initiative like this is needed more than ever.

WHO recommendations on home-based records for maternal, newborn and child health (2018)

A home-based record is a health document used to record the history of health services received by an individual. It is kept in the household, in either paper or electronic format, by the individual or their caregiver and is intended to be integrated into the health information system and complement records maintained by health facilities.

They range from antenatal notes or vaccination-only cards, progressing to more expanded vaccination-plus cards, child health books or integrated maternal and child health books, which often include health education messages. For simplicity, the term “home-based record” is used throughout this document.

The use of some form of home-based record is widespread globally. They vary greatly across countries and regions, in terms of their design and the information they document. Ownership is near universal in some countries, but very patchy in others. While home-based records have been widely implemented for decades, the evidence of the benefits and harms has not been systematically reviewed and summarized.

This guideline seeks to address this gap by reviewing the evidence of the effects of home-based records on maternal, newborn and child health outcomes and health service delivery outcomes.

Related links

<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241550352>

<https://apps.who.int/iris/rest/bitstreams/1149497/retrieve> (PDF link)

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