

YES OR NO? INFORMED CONSENT.

This week we are going to chat about 'Informed consent'. This is the process of talking about options so you can make an informed decision about your health care. This includes the option of saying yes or no to a treatment or procedure.

Informed consent gives us control and responsibility for ourselves and our children. Informed consent is particularly relevant to maternity care because pregnancy, labour and birth etc are normal physical functions, not illnesses, so healthy people could, in theory, manage without any treatment at all. Most, however, appreciate the monitoring, support and advice that they receive from their LMC's and/or specialists and some need the treatments/procedures that are available.

Every person should be given the opportunity to make informed choices about the maternity care they receive.

It is your legal right to give — or deny — permission for care. But how do you know what's best for you both? Making informed decisions about maternity care means finding the best available information on your options and using that information to decide what's right for you and your baby. It sometimes means having the courage and confidence to ask tough questions of potential or current care providers and staff to ensure the options you want are available to you. Attending antenatal classes is a great start to gaining lots of information and knowledge about medical treatment and procedures in an unbiased way.

So, what is informed consent?

BEFORE any medical treatment or intervention is a fundamental human right to know and understand all your options, this means that your health care provider is responsible for explaining:

- why this type of care is being offered
- what it would involve (the process of the treatment or procedure)
- the risks and benefits that are associated with this type of care
- alternatives to this care, and the risks and benefits of these other options
- including the possibility of doing nothing at the present time ("watchful waiting")

The only exception to this requirement is in the case of an emergency. This means you are unconscious or the doctor needs to act quickly to save your life.

Why is informed consent important?

People are often left feeling disempowered, a situation contributing to negative feelings about their birthing experience. This may have a lasting effect during the postnatal period, increasing the risk of postnatal depression (PND), and can potentially lead to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Of course, there is only so much we can predict when it comes to giving birth. Being as informed as possible can help you deal wisely with any new decisions you have to make throughout the birthing process. Now is the time to do your "homework": Read up on risks and benefits, get answers to your questions, think about your preferences well before labour begins, and make those preferences known to your LMC, partner and support people. You can make these known through discussion and by asking that your wishes be included in the health records that will be available at your place of birth.

In a recent study at Boston University called 'Listening to Mothers'. Almost one in four mothers said they did not fully understand that they had the legal right to clear and full explanations of any procedure during childbirth, and that they had the right to accept or refuse any procedure.

You may feel uncertain or uneasy about becoming so actively involved in decision-making. Information and advice from studies, news reports, online features, and friends and relatives can differ. It's hard to know what or whom to believe, especially when facing decisions that can possibly have lasting effects on you and your baby. In the end, it is a good idea to make those decisions based on research and science that has measured the risks and benefits — combined, of course, with your own values and preferences.

Why not put together a birth plan -that way if you can't communicate during your labour for any reason, your LMC, partner and support providers are aware of your wishes and can advocate for you. The best way that we can ensure that we protect our right to informed consent is to educate ourselves and use it. Whatever way you choose to approach this, do everything you can to make sure you go into this life event armed with balanced and evidence-based information.

To get the information you need you may want to make a list of questions and jot down the answers.

- I don't understand (treatment/procedure)
- Please explain this to me - step by step
- What could happen to me or my baby if I do that? What if I don't?
- What are my other options?
- What if I take no action ("watchful waiting")?
- Please show me the research to support what you're recommending
- Where can I get more information?
- I have some information I'd like to share with you
- I'm uncomfortable with what you are recommending
- Can you recommend someone else to speak with to get a second opinion?

