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Best practices for online Canadian prenatal health promotion: A public health approach

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ABSTRACT

Background: Prenatal health promotion provides information regarding pregnancy risks, protective behaviours and clinical and community resources. Typically, women obtain prenatal health information from health care providers, prenatal classes, peers/family, media and increasingly, Internet sites and mobile apps. Barriers to prenatal health promotion and related services include language, rural/remote location, citizenship and disability. Online public health platforms represent the capacity to reach underserved women and can be customised to address the needs of a heterogeneous population of pregnant women.

Aim: Canadian government-hosted websites and online prenatal e-classes were evaluated to determine if accessible, inclusive, comprehensive and evidence-based prenatal health promotion was provided.

Methods: Using a multijurisdictional approach, federal, provincial/territorial, municipal and public health region-hosted websites, along with affiliated prenatal e-classes, were evaluated based on four criteria: comprehensiveness, evidence-based information, accessibility and inclusivity.

Findings: Online prenatal e-classes, federal, provincial/territorial and public health-hosted websites generally provided comprehensive and evidence-based promotion of essential prenatal topics, in contrast to municipal-hosted websites which provided very limited prenatal health information. Gaps in online prenatal health promotion were identified as lack of French and multilingual content, targeted information and representations of Indigenous peoples, immigrants and women with disabilities.

Conclusion: Canadian online prenatal health promotion is broadly comprehensive and evidence-based, but fails to address the needs of non-Anglophones and represent the diverse population of Canadian pregnant women. It is recommended that agencies enhance the organisation of website pregnancy portals/pages and collaborate with other jurisdictions and community groups to ensure linguistically accessible, culturally-competent and inclusive prenatal online resources.

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Statement of significance

Problem or issue

Prenatal health promotion mitigates adverse pregnancy outcomes; however, women marginalised by race/ethnicity, geography, disability and Indigenous status experience barriers accessing prenatal health information.

What is already known

Although increasingly women use online prenatal health resources, these channels may be inaccurate. Public health agencies are mandated to promote health and have the resources and public trust to provide evidence-based, credible prenatal health information.

What this paper adds

Canadian government-hosted websites and prenatal e-classes are broadly comprehensive and evidence-based, but to a lesser extent, accessible and inclusive. Canadian prenatal health promotion lacked representations of women with disabilities and disability-specific information/resources. Partnerships with at-risk communities and jurisdictional collaborations are recommended.

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1. Introduction

Prenatal health promotion encompasses health policies, awareness campaigns and educational interventions that encourage women to optimise healthy behaviours and reduce risks, thereby supporting maternal and child health.^{1–4} Recognising the diverse, interactive determinants of reproductive health throughout the life course,⁵ strategies for promoting prenatal health should also target preconception, interconception and early pregnancy.⁶ Promoting healthy behaviours throughout the life course can positively influence pregnancy outcomes, including reducing risks for birth defects and preterm birth.^{5–7}

Effective prenatal health promotion should be evidence-based and employ strategies to promote accessible and inclusive prenatal services to at-risk populations.^{7,8} The evidence regarding many modifiable prenatal risks is consistent, yielding relatively standard prenatal health guidelines and recommendations.^{2,7,8} Important areas for prenatal risk screening include chronic medical conditions/infectious diseases, medication use, genetics and immunisation records.⁷ Preconception and early prenatal interventions also represent opportunities to promote nutrition, physical activity and social support, while mitigating risks posed by tobacco, alcohol and substance use, occupational and environmental exposures, and obesity and excess gestational weight gain,^{6,7,9} as described in [Box 1](#).

Women access prenatal health promotion through various channels including health care providers,^{1,2,4} prenatal classes/programmes¹⁰ and the Internet.¹¹ Online health promotion is a cost-effective strategy to provide information, resources and education to a large diverse audience.^{10,11,12} It is estimated that approximately 87% of Canadians have Internet access,¹³ supporting Internet health promotion strategies as viable and broadly accessible in Canada. Studies from Canada,¹⁴ the U.S.,¹⁵ the U.K.¹¹ and Australia¹² report that women use the Internet to obtain information on maternal-child health topics including environmental hazards, physical activity, nutrition, labour, and pregnancy complications.

The Centres for Disease Control (CDC)/Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) Preconception Care Work Group recognise the role of public health agencies in the development and delivery of prenatal health promotion programmes.⁷ Both public health and prenatal health promotion strategies develop targeted interventions for communities marginalised by race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status (SES), and citizenship.³ Public health in Canada includes promotion of healthy pregnancy and childhood development, as well as prenatal

education.¹⁰ Canada's geographic diversity (urban, rural and remote) poses unique challenges for the delivery of public and prenatal health services to a heterogeneous, multicultural and multilingual population—challenges which may be addressed by online prenatal health promotion platforms. Recognising the potential role of government-hosted websites to provide prenatal health information, the purpose of this study is to evaluate the current availability and quality of Canadian online prenatal health promotion. Specifically, this study will assess whether government-hosted websites and affiliated online prenatal education programmes (prenatal e-classes) provide accessible, inclusive, comprehensive and evidence-based prenatal health promotion to Canadians.

2. Methods

2.1. Website and prenatal e-class inclusion criteria

A multijurisdictional approach was used to select government-hosted websites at federal, provincial/territorial and municipal levels, along with public health regional units. In Canada, public health activities and services are delivered through three government levels: federal, provincial/territorial and municipal.¹⁶ Federal and provincial/territorial health agencies are involved in research, surveillance and health policy, while most municipalities provide health services at a local, community level.¹⁶ Websites from each province/territory were included in the evaluation ([Table 1](#)).

Within each province/territory, public health at the community level is delivered by regional health authorities. In Ontario, Local Health Integration Networks are comprised of public health units.¹⁰ Throughout this paper, we refer to public health units and regional health authorities as “public health regional units”. Municipalities and public health regional units included in the study were selected based on geographic representation across Canada, with emphasis on provincial capitals and demographically large cities or regions ([Table 1](#)). Three federal (Health Canada, Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), Environment Canada), 13 provincial/territorial, 8 municipal and 10 public health regional unit-hosted websites were assessed ([Table 1](#)).

An environmental scan of provincial/territorial, municipal and public health regional unit websites led to the identification of several types of prenatal e-classes endorsed by these organisations ([Table 2](#)). Inclusion of prenatal e-classes for evaluation was purposive, ensuring both geographic representation and widespread affiliation with multiple municipalities/public health regional units ([Table 2](#)). Six commercially-developed prenatal e-classes endorsed and promoted by public health regional units and one prenatal e-class developed by an Ontario public health unit

Box 1. Preconception-prenatal topics important for prenatal health.^{2,7,9}

- Abuse
- Alcohol
- Drugs
- Emotional health
- Environmental health
- Gestational weight gain
- Nutrition
- Occupational health
- Physical activity
- Sexually transmitted infections
- Smoking
- Vaccinations
- Vitamins

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