

## Research Briefing

### Risk messages relating to fertility and pregnancy: a media content analysis

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This study forms part of the [WRISK Project](#), a collaboration between BPAS and Cardiff University.

#### Background

The UK media communicates health-related "risk messages" to the general public, and these messages shape people's decisions about their health. This study aimed to describe risk messages about pregnancy and fertility in the UK media, and assess their accuracy.

#### Methods

We counted the number of science-based risk headlines relating to pregnancy or fertility in the UK media over four months. We also looked at the content of the articles.

We grouped newspaper headlines into categories based on the risk factor they described e.g., maternal cigarette smoking or a poor diet (also known as the *exposure*), and the *outcome* of interest e.g., a low birth weight or birth defect.

We selected four media stories for closer content analysis and assessed how accurate they were compared to the original scientific study they were reporting. We looked at the whole pipeline of communication from scientific study to the media report, including the role of press releases.

#### Key Findings

We counted 171 pregnancy- and fertility-related headlines over four months - an average of 43 a month.

The media stories tended to focus on risk factors relating to pregnant women, especially their food and drink consumption, medications, or underlying health factors. However, when it came to health outcomes the stories mostly focused on children's health rather than that of pregnant women.

Media reports were largely faithful to press releases. Where differences from the underlying scientific study were identified, these could mostly be traced back to press releases issued by academic institutions, or quotes from the study's authors. Press releases often left out the limitations of research, which were reinserted by the journalists writing the media reports. Journalists also added additional expert criticism of the scientific studies.

#### Conclusions

Science-based risk messages in the UK media frame pregnant women as vectors of potential harm to children, who are the focus of health outcomes. Largely, the media does not introduce misinformation, but reports press releases faithfully with additional caveats and expert commentary. Press releases fulfil an interpretative role, often omitting caveats and introducing new elements and advice to women.

#### Read the paper

<https://wellcomeopenresearch.org/articles/6-114/v1>

