



Pregnant and breastfeeding mothers' health literacy and information-seeking regarding complementary medicine products

Larisa Barnes, PhD Candidate^{1,2}, Emeritus Professor Lesley Barclay^{2,3},
Professor Kirsten McCaffery³, Professor Parisa Aslani¹

¹University of Sydney School of Pharmacy, ²University of Sydney University Centre for Rural Health, ³University of Sydney School of Public Health



Introduction

Information-seeking is an important component of healthcare decision-making.^{1,2} Pregnant and breastfeeding women use multiple information sources regarding complementary medicine products (CMPs).³⁻⁶ However, the rationale for this, and the types of information mothers seek has not been fully investigated.

Aims

- Describe women's CMPs information sources.
- Understand women's rationale for the information sought.
- Investigate how women feel their health care practitioners (HCPs) can help them receive information they require.

Methods

- Qualitative investigation involving thematic analysis of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 25 women. Women also completed a demographic survey and two health literacy screening tools.^{7,8}
- **Inclusion criteria:** 18+ years; currently pregnant/breastfeeding and using CMPs (ingested herbal medicines, dietary supplements, & probiotics); residing in metropolitan Sydney or South-East Queensland) or Northern Rivers New South Wales.

Results

Three main sources of CMPs information were reported, **published research, own and others' previous experiences** and **HCPs** (Figure 1). Women wanted practical and safety information on CMPs, to know how CMPs worked, rationale for CMPs recommendations or prescriptions, and what to expect when taking CMPs (Thematic analysis). Participants wanted all their HCPs to be educated in CMPs and to provide appropriate and unbiased information on CMPs.

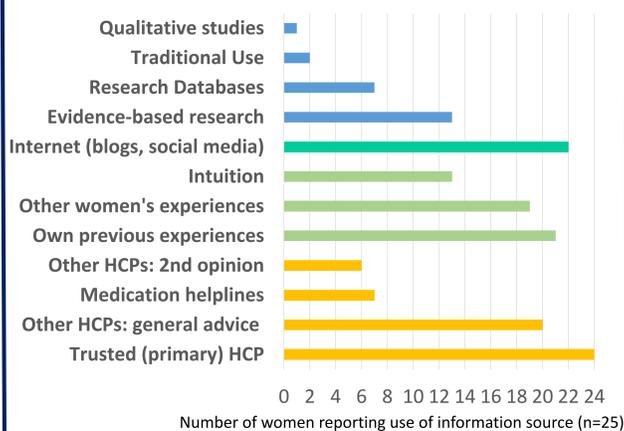


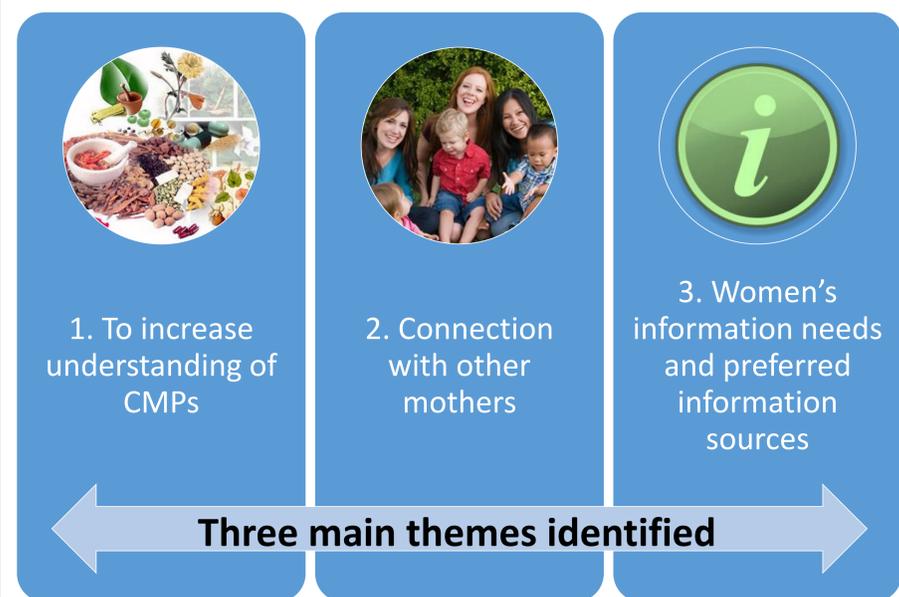
Figure 1. Participants' reported CMPs information sources^{9,10}

Demographics

Table 1. Participant demographics^{9,10}

Age range	23-40 (mean = 33 years)	
Pregnant / breastfeeding	Pregnant	n=7
	Breastfeeding	n=17
	Pregnant & breastfeeding	n=1
Education	TAFE / University	n=22
	Year 12 equivalent	n=2
	Year 10 equivalent	n=1
Functional health literacy levels (Newest Vital Sign) ⁷	Adequate	n=23
	Inadequate	n=1
	Not completed	n=1
Risk of limited health literacy (single-item screening question) ⁸	Adequate health literacy	n=22
	At risk of inadequate health literacy	n=2
	Not completed	n=1
CMP use	Participants reported taking between 1-10 CMPs each	
Most popular CMPS	Pregnancy & breastfeeding multivitamins; Iron supplements; Probiotics; EPA/DHA supplements and Herbal teas	

Thematic analysis¹⁰



Information sought from Health Care Practitioners & Published Research

- Dose
- Safety, including contraindications
- How a CMP works
- Why recommended?
- How to take CMPs correctly and safely

Information sought from Other Mothers

- Confirm effectiveness
- Checking safety & side effects
- What to expect when taking CMPs
- Shared experiences
- Shared support

Figure 2. Thematic analysis of the results¹⁰

"If there's any evidence-based info out there, then I look at that, and then the qualitative studies or just traditional use. ... Our GP is a herbalist as well... I always ask her 'Is there something natural I can take, something that's not contraindicated?' I trust her judgement."

... I look at people's experiences, ...people I can rely on and other health professionals, so naturopaths and others. ...And then I'll go off and do my own research, usually a Google search and ...then a proper evidence-based search with hospital or university search engines. ...

... then finding out a few other women that have tried it or taken it and how it worked for them and what didn't work. I think that way sometimes you can see if it has got some other side effects...you get the user experience."

Marley*, breastfeeding mother

"I ask my naturopath for a description what each thing does - I want to know why I'm taking it, what it does for me, knowing exactly what's in it, so I can actually research it and know why I'm taking it."

Elise*, breastfeeding mother

"It's important to know what it [CMP] is used for and what the risk factors are, so side effects and contraindications, particularly whether it's going to affect the baby or not, whether your pregnant or breastfeeding. ... The dosage, how much you're supposed to take. ... the interaction with other medications, long-term effects and the short-term effects, like if there's any long-term effects on development particularly for babies."

Penelope*, pregnant mother

"I really wish that medical professionals in the hospital setting would be more embracing of complementary medicine, because I think the two can really work well together. ...I'd really like to see more of a meeting point or a melding of the two ways."

Bella*, breastfeeding mother



*Pseudonyms used

Conclusions: Participants sought information from their primary HCPs as well as other information sources. They felt this helped them make safe decisions regarding CMPs. Their good health literacy skills facilitated their active information-seeking. Participants appreciated integrative or complementary health care and wanted more biomedical practitioners to be more open to and educated in CMP use. All HCPs should be encouraged to have open discussions regarding women's choices to use CMPs in pregnancy and lactation. All HCPs also need to consider the variety of information sources women access, and help women access reliable information regarding the safety of CMPs, and CMPs' efficacy, indications and actions in the body.

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Contact larisa.barnes@sydney.edu.au | +61 2 6620 2145 or +61 432 730 407