
Birthmarks

The Cost of Motherhood

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Foreward by Rose Leto



Mother's Day is often wrapped in soft pastels, flowers on the table, brunch at her favourite spot and cards that celebrate the joys of motherhood. But these moments only tell part of the story.

As both a mother and a medical malpractice lawyer, I have seen firsthand a very different side of motherhood. In my practice, I have represented mothers dealing with the lasting effects of medical complications during labour and childbirth, including cases where medical negligence changed their lives forever. This side of motherhood is one that's rarely acknowledged in public conversations: the physical toll of childbirth, the emotional challenges that can follow, and the long-term health consequences that aren't at the heart of the conversation.

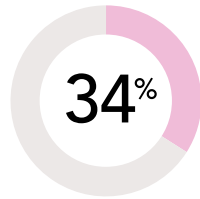
Birthmarks: The Cost of Motherhood goes beyond the traditional celebrations to examine the true and often overlooked experiences women face during labour and childbirth. It explores the emotional landscape women navigate during their journey into motherhood. Feelings of fear, anxiety, loss of control, empowerment, and lasting trauma.

This report captures the personal perspectives of women across Canada and cultivates a deeper understanding of how labour and childbirth are experienced, remembered and carried forward. The stories within *Birthmarks* underscore the need for a more holistic view of maternal care, one that recognizes the birth of a healthy child and the mother's experience as equally important.

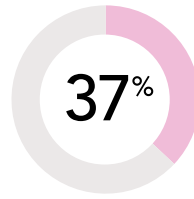
This Mother's Day, I invite you to look beyond the surface and reflect more deeply on what it truly takes to become a mother.

Results At A Glance

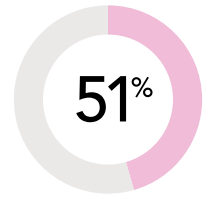
While a majority of mothers recall a positive labour and birth experience, a significant minority of those we surveyed report experiencing a challenging or distressing labour.



34% of all mothers surveyed say they had a challenging or distressing labour

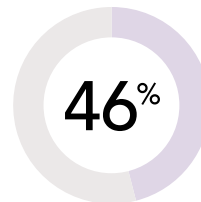


37% of mothers who report being of a visible minority say the same



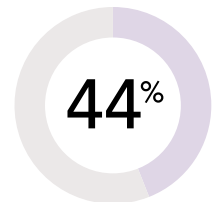
51% of those who did not have a partner or support person say the same

Labour and childbirth has a lasting impact on maternal mental health.



46% said it impacted their mental health*

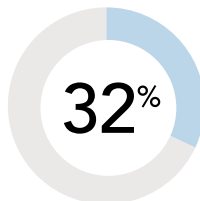
*This increases to 64% for those who had very challenging experiences



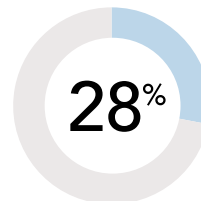
44% said they still feel anxious and emotionally affected by their experiences*

*This increases to 70% for those who had very challenging experiences

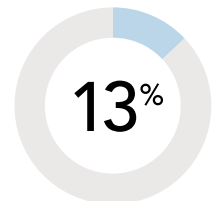
Patient advocacy is critical and too-often overlooked during labour and childbirth.



32% of mothers felt dismissed or ignored by medical professionals at times

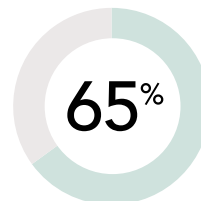


28% of mothers said they felt pressured into medical decisions

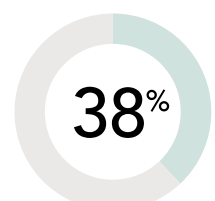


13% of mothers felt their concerns were not taken seriously by medical professionals

We need open conversation and awareness around the true challenges of labour and childbirth.



65% of respondents feel that society expects us to focus only on having a healthy baby, ignoring what mothers go through



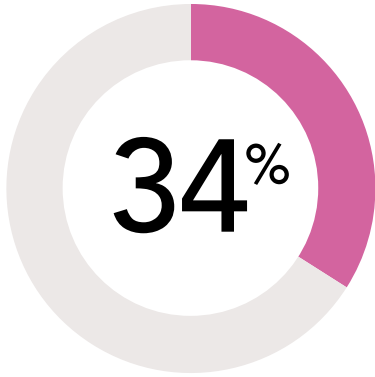
38% report feeling as though we are not supposed to talk about how traumatic childbirth can be

The Many Realities of Childbirth

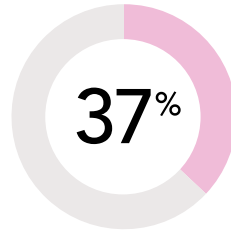
While a majority of mothers recall a positive labour and birth experience, a significant minority of those we surveyed report experiencing a challenging or distressing labour. This number rises as we look at those who are visible minorities or going through labour without a partner or support person.

The Mother's Experience

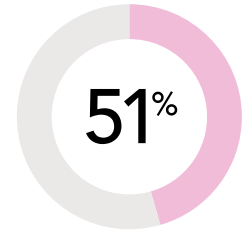
Among all women surveyed, 34% said their labour was challenging or distressing. This data opens up the need for greater awareness and conversation about the true experience of childbirth.



34% of all mothers say they had a challenging or distressing labour



37% of mothers who report being of a visible minority say the same



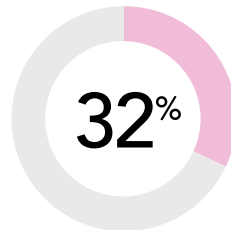
51% of those who did not have a partner or support person say the same

The Effect of Unexpected Complications

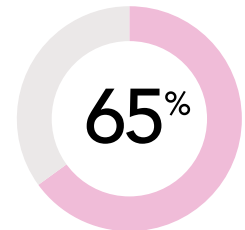


"I wish I was prepared mentally and physically on what to expect."

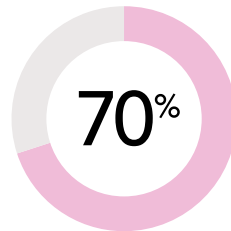
MOTHER, 3+ KIDS,
UNPLANNED COMPLICATIONS



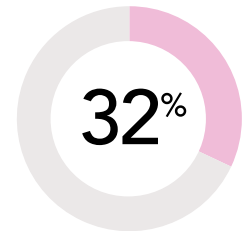
Among all respondents, 32% felt unprepared for what happened during their labour and delivery.



65% of mothers we surveyed had unplanned complications or interventions, including emergency C-sections, induction, or undue pain



70% of those who had unplanned complications or intervention mothers said it was unexpected



Of those that experienced an unplanned complication, 32% felt it may have been preventable in their opinion

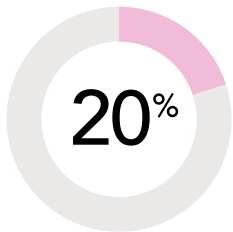


“I would have loved it if someone acknowledged the pain I had endured during childbirth, and to validate that emergency c-section was or is a scary thing. I know they do it often, but I would have liked to have been comforted and validated. I often see online that people who have c-sections have it “easier” than a vaginal birth because you don’t have the risk of tearing etc. I think both ways are scary and painful, but nevertheless a beautiful thing women go through. Yes, of course a healthy baby is always the best outcome but just recognizing women for what they have to endure and support and comfort them would go a long way.”

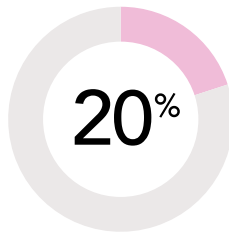
FIRST TIME MOTHER, CHALLENGING BIRTH WITH UNPLANNED COMPLICATION / INTERVENTION

The Importance of Medical Clarity

When diving further into the experiences of those who experienced unplanned complications or interventions, we see there is a lack of clear communication to the mother.



20% felt the complication was not explained well to them in the moment.



20% felt they were not listened to or empowered by medical professionals.*

*This number rises to 33% when looking at those who had a very distressing or challenging experience.



“If you feel like something is happening without consent, or are confused not being told about what happened till after the fact, ask to speak to a doctor to ensure someone, or even you, were asked if that was the right decision, even if you felt very uncomfortable or not heard. You have more than a right to ask why things happened without consent.”

MOTHER, 2 KIDS, WITH UNPLANNED COMPLICATION / INTERVENTION

Takeaway

Labour and childbirth is not one-size-fits-all. While many carry positive memories of their experience, this data reveals how this can shift when complications arise, mothers don't feel heard, or there is a lack of medical information being shared.

Recognizing the full spectrum of experiences is not only about broadening the narrative; it's about identifying where the current systems are falling short. Prioritizing patient-centered care is crucial to reduce maternal distress and shape how childbirth is experienced.

Maternal Mental Health After Labour and Childbirth

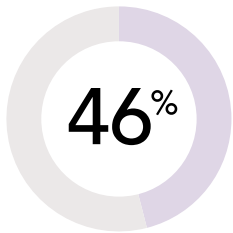
The emotional and psychological impact from labour and childbirth can be just as long-lasting as the physical, but it's far less visible. The effect on maternal mental health is not limited to those who experience challenging or traumatic childbirths. It is felt by all mothers who carry feelings of anxiety, stress and trauma in the days, weeks and even years that follow.



“One piece of advice I’m glad I received is that every labour and childbirth experience is different, so it’s important to stay flexible rather than fixating on a perfect birth plan. Preparing yourself mentally, understanding your options, and building a strong support system can make a big difference. I also think it’s helpful to remember that asking questions and advocating for yourself during the process is completely okay.”

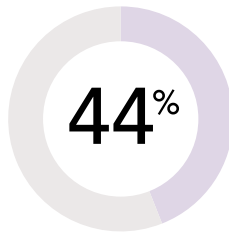
FIRST TIME MOTHER

Looking at all mothers surveyed, including those with a positive labour and delivery experience, reveals almost half feel a lasting impact on their mental health and anxiety.



46% said it impacted their mental health*

*This increases to 64% for those who had very challenging experiences



44% said they still feel anxious and emotionally affected by their experiences*

*This increases to 70% for those who had very challenging experiences



“Having a baby is difficult and what happens after can be a whole new and different experience. But what really matters through the whole process is how you feel, your needs and concerns, and taking care of yourself and your mental health.”

MOTHER, 2 KIDS, UNPLANNED COMPLICATION / INTERVENTION

Takeaway

Maternal care cannot and should not end after physical recovery. With nearly half of all mothers surveyed reporting lasting psychological effects, maternal emotional wellbeing must be considered as a standard component of postpartum care.

Recognizing the toll the labour and childbirth experience can have on mothers is an essential first step in reducing stigma and ensuring that their full recoveries are supported and acknowledged.

One Mother's Journey Through Birth, Complications, and Beyond



When I presented to the hospital in labour, I was already 4 cm dilated. This was my first pregnancy, and I expected the labour and delivery to go smoothly. The medical team managing my care decided to break my water, and give me Oxytocin to assist my labour. I didn't know it at the time, but the use of Oxytocin was actually contra-indicated in my case based on the Hospital's own policy.

My baby's heart rate did not respond well to the Oxytocin, and she started showing signs of distress. The Oxytocin should have been stopped, and I should have been offered a c-section then, but instead the dose was actually increased and kept on for another 4 hours.

When it came time to push, there was intense stress in the room. My baby's heart rate showed that she was in extreme distress, and the alarms were ringing. I was so scared. No one told me what was happening or gave me any choice in how the delivery was going to proceed. Without asking me, the doctor used both the vacuum and forceps to help get the baby out. When that didn't work, an emergency c-section was finally called, but there was no anesthesiologist available, so I had to wait, knowing my baby's life was at stake.

When the baby was born, she was silent and lifeless. Doctors tried to resuscitate her, and I was terrified, waiting for my baby to cry. Once stabilized, she began having seizures and was soon after transferred to SickKids for specialized care. Imaging showed that the baby had bleeding in her brain, skull fractures and a significant, permanent and life altering brain injury.

At that moment, my needs didn't matter to me – all that mattered was the health of my baby girl. Instead of recovering from my c-section, I stayed by my daughter's side.

I felt guilty for what happened for a long time, I felt like it was my fault, like I should have done more, I should have realized what was happening, asked more questions, and pushed for a c-section. I carry that guilt with me.

During my labour, I tried to advocate for myself and my daughter, but felt like I was silenced. As a first time mom with no experience, and a visible minority, I felt that my voice was not heard or taken seriously.

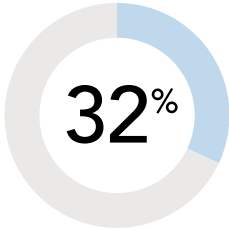
I want other women to know that they can demand answers for what is happening to their body. Don't be silent, and trust your instincts if things don't feel right.

-RS

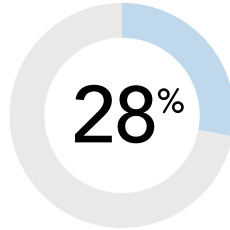
Medical Advocacy & Maternal Voice

Labour and childbirth is a vulnerable time for mothers, during which they rely on healthcare professionals to guide them through the process. The level of support they receive has a direct impact on the quality of their experiences and how comfortable they feel advocating for themselves in the moment.

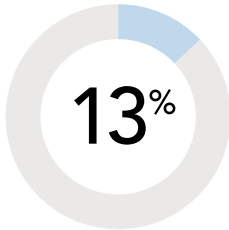
While the majority of respondents felt supported by their medical team during their labour and delivery, a significant minority felt their concerns were ignored or overlooked, highlighting the need for consistent patient advocacy and support.



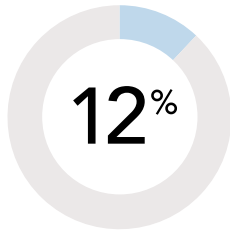
32% of mothers felt dismissed or ignored by medical professionals at times



28% felt pressured into medical decisions



13% felt their concerns were not taken seriously



12% did not know who to ask when something felt wrong



“Always ensure the staff are aware that you are there. I was forgotten about for approximately 24 hours while having contractions. No check ins from nurses, no pain medication, no gravol, nobody checking on my baby's heart rate. Bring a strong advocate, if you can.”

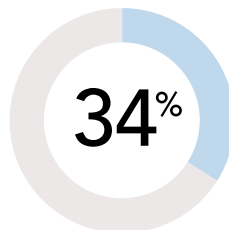
FIRST TIME MOTHER



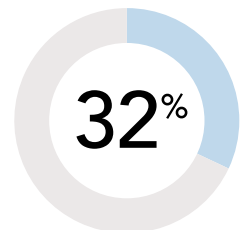
“I wish someone had told me to advocate more for myself. Doctors do not know everything and don't know your body like you do.”

MOTHER, 2 KIDS, CHALLENGING BIRTH WITH UNPLANNED COMPLICATION / INTERVENTION

When looking specifically at additional issues faced during labour, such as pain, physical discomfort and anxiety, 65% of mothers surveyed said they had issues they felt were not addressed or taken seriously.

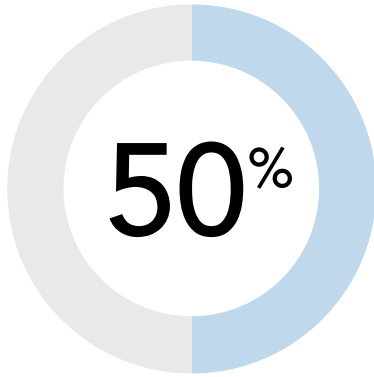


34% had pain or physical discomfort they felt was not addressed by medical professionals

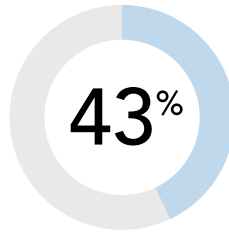


32% had anxiety or fear which they felt was not taken seriously

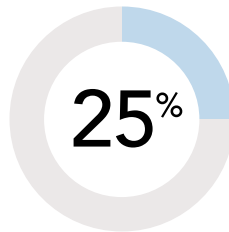
When looking at those who had a very challenging labour and delivery experience, we see a significant 87% say they had issues that they felt weren't addressed or taken seriously by medical professionals.



Over 50% had pain that wasn't taken seriously



43% said they felt dismissed or ignored at times



25% said their concerns were not taken seriously



"Trust your body and your instincts. You know better than anybody else."

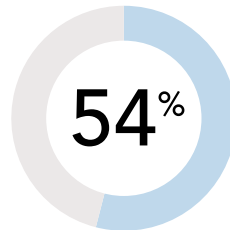
MOTHER, 3+ KIDS, UNPLANNED COMPLICATION / INTERVENTION



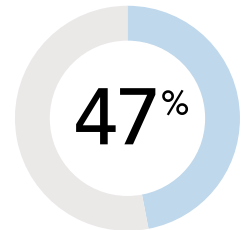
"Advocate for yourself. Especially when it comes to pain management. Some nurses will try to talk you out of the epidural (this happened with my second labour and delivery). Always make your wishes clear and make sure your partner knows as well so there is a clear plan of action."

MOTHER, 3+ KIDS, UNPLANNED COMPLICATION / INTERVENTION

We also see a heightened feeling around other issues such as pain, physical discomfort and anxiety having not been addressed or taken seriously for those with challenging experiences. Additionally, for those who went through childbirth without a partner or support person, 40% said their lack of emotional support was not addressed or taken seriously.



54% had pain or physical discomfort they felt was not addressed



47% experienced anxiety or fear they felt was not taken seriously.

Takeaway

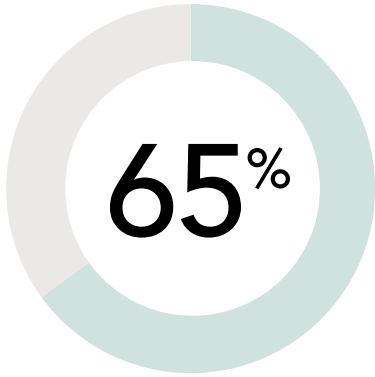
Improving maternal care requires more than medical skill. It also demands active listening, clear communication and an environment where women feel empowered to speak up.

Empowering women to advocate for themselves during childbirth and labour is essential, but that responsibility cannot sit with mothers alone. In a moment ripe with vulnerability, pain, and uncertainty, the ability to advocate for themselves is directly tied to the environment created by medical professionals.

Even small breakdowns in communication can have lasting consequences on a mother's experience. Maternal support during labour and childbirth should be consistent, responsive and centered on the mother's voice, no matter how routine or complex the delivery may be.

Social Expectations around Labour & Childbirth

The societal narrative surrounding labour and childbirth often focuses on the excitement of welcoming a new, happy and healthy baby. While there has been some movement towards better awareness of the mother's true experience during labour, there is still significant work that needs to be done.



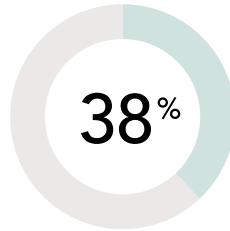
65% of mothers surveyed feel that society still expects us to only focus on having a healthy baby, ignoring what mothers go through



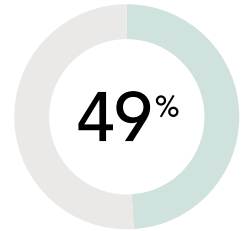
“You’re a warrior however you give birth to your baby. I’ve had both; a vaginal delivery and a c-section baby. Both were hard. My recovery post c-section was the worst pain I’ve ever felt. Regardless of how you brought your baby into this world, whether medicated or not, you’re a star.”

MOTHER, 2 KIDS

In addition, when asking about whether they feel they can talk about the trauma of childbirth, a significant number of mothers disagree.



38% of all mothers surveyed feel as though we are not supposed to talk about how traumatic childbirth can be.



This rises to 49% for those who experienced a very challenging labour.



“I wish I was more informed on how to advocate for my personal choice when it comes to childbirth, and more of the difficult parts instead of just the beauty of having a kid.”

MOTHER, 1 KID, CHALLENGING BIRTH WITH UNPLANNED COMPLICATION / INTERVENTION

Takeaway

While the arrival of a healthy baby is important, an exclusive focus on the child can unintentionally ignore the realities of the mother's experience. When women feel that their pain or trauma falls outside of what is socially acceptable to discuss, it limits society's ability to understand the true process behind becoming a mother.

Shifting the narrative requires acknowledging that both can exist: the joy of welcoming a new child and the difficulty of the journey to get there. Encouraging mothers to speak candidly about their experiences is essential to breaking down stigma and ensuring that the full cost of motherhood is recognized, validated, and addressed.

The Need for Better Patient Advocacy

The cost of motherhood extends far beyond what is typically acknowledged by society. It's not only shaped by medical outcomes, but by the experiences, emotions and care mothers receive. Too often, these realities are not spoken about.

Open conversation is not only important, it is necessary. It is how we begin to close the gaps in care, strengthen patient advocacy, and ensure that women feel supported and empowered to speak up throughout their experience.

Mother's Day is a moment to celebrate the mothers in our lives, but it should also be a moment to reflect more honestly on what motherhood asks of women. Beyond the flowers and the cards lies an experience that is complex, emotional and sometimes traumatizing. Recognizing these challenges should not take away from the joy of motherhood. It should deepen our understanding of it.

If we want to make a tangible difference in maternal care, we must bring these conversations to the forefront. Listen to women, learn from their experiences, and hold systems accountable for the care they provide.



“It’s okay to ask for help if you feel like you really need it, both during and after childbirth. In practice it was very hard and I still feel like it’s hard to ask for help. But it made me feel not so alone.”

MOTHER, 1 KID, CHALLENGING
BIRTH WITH UNPLANNED
COMPLICATION / INTERVENTION

Survey Methodology

This survey, in partnership with Fuse Insights, surveyed 1,015 mothers of children under 4 online in English only, in February 2026. To qualify, respondents had to have given birth in the last 3 years in Canada; they were then asked further questions about the most recent time they went through labour and childbirth. Quotas were used to ensure suitable representation of women from visible ethnic minorities, and that the geographic profile of those surveyed reflects that of the Anglophone population of Canada (excluding Quebec).

Throughout this report, results reflect the opinions and views of the women surveyed; they should not be taken as evidence of medical outcomes.

About Neinstein

Neinstein LLP is a results-driven boutique law firm in Toronto. We represent victims of medical harm and advocate for safer patient care.

Our team delivers superior advocacy for our clients through expertise and empathy, both inside and outside the courtroom. We have a demonstrated and steadfast commitment to fighting for what's right: Whether that's representing our clients at the Supreme Court of Canada or speaking publicly about patient safety. We deliver life-changing results, build strong relationships, and support our clients on their road to recovery. We are proud to be a solutions-focused firm.

In addition to our focus on medical negligence, we also specialize in personal injury and mass torts. We have created impactful outcomes and widespread social change.

Currently, Neinstein is championing tech accountability by representing school boards across Canada in a multi-billion dollar lawsuit against social media giants for their targeted disruption to education and interference with student development.

Many members of our experienced legal team are Lexpert-ranked, distinguished amongst the Best Lawyers, AV-rated through Martindale-Hubbell, and hold specialist designations in Civil Litigation. We are consistently recognized by Canadian Lawyer as one of the Top 10 Personal Injury Boutique Firms.