Bringing Home a New Baby—and the New Coronavirus

Two infected parents, wrestling three children and a newborn, try to stay close from a safe distance

By Brianna Abbott
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Tamar Weinberger saw her three kids playing outside their home in Teaneck, N.J., as her car rolled up the driveway. The children, 10, 7 and 3 years old, converged on the car, anxious to meet the newest member of their family, a baby boy. But Tamar quickly whisked the new baby out of their reach.

“I’m sorry, you can’t see your brother today,” she said. “Just wave from afar.”

Before leaving the hospital where she had given birth, Tamar, 33, an allergy immunologist, tested positive for the new coronavirus. Her husband, who had been tested after showing symptoms a few days earlier, was already isolated in a room in their house while awaiting the result. He wasn’t there for the birth.

The Weinbergers have had to navigate a new reality, attempting to be there for their children while protecting them, and celebrating a new life amid a pandemic.

“We need to take it seriously and we need to protect our vulnerable population, but life is still going to go on,” said Tamar. “There’s still going to be happy things and scary things, and there’s going to be unknown territory.”

Data on the effect of Covid-19 on pregnant women, newborns and children is scant, and expectant families and doctors world-wide must make decisions with limited information.

Tamar’s husband, Dov Weinberger, 34, a physician who works in New York, developed a fever, chills and aches on March 10, after first having a dry cough. Tests for other respiratory viruses came up negative, and Dov isolated himself while waiting for his Covid-19 test result.

Two days later, Tamar felt mild contractions. On March 13, a Friday morning, she drove herself to the hospital before her kids got up, not wanting to have a conversation with them about why she was going alone. Their live-in nanny would look after the children while she was away.
“Just not having my husband there was so hard,” Tamar said.

Her baby arrived that day. The staff, aware of her husband’s possible infection, wore protective gear during the delivery. Dov did manage to see some of it through FaceTime, though one of the nurses had to keep plugging in the charger on Tamar’s phone.

Dov got a virtual glimpse after the baby was born. The child, the couple’s first since Dov recovered from lymphoma in 2018, already felt like a miracle. “It was also so happy because he came out perfect,” Tamar said.

But soon a nurse came into the room wheeling a unit to isolate the baby, and Tamar felt her face drop. She had told the hospital of her husband’s illness, and hospital policy dictated that babies born to mothers infected or at risk of coronavirus infection must be quarantined.

The policy mirrors what doctors in Hong Kong and other places recommend, but is considered controversial because it interferes with mother-and-baby bonding, experts said. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggest that facilities consider temporarily separating a mother from her infant.

“We don’t really know what the effect is of early infection on the baby. It’s a critical period for a lot of development,” said Kevin Slavin, an expert in pediatric infectious diseases and the director of quality at Hackensack Meridian Health Children’s Services.

After the delivery, Tamar experienced complications and developed a fever. She was tested for Covid-19 that Saturday, a day after giving birth, and spent the day recovering alone.

That was the most difficult part of the experience, she said later. “There’s nothing like having a baby and not getting to see him,” she said.

By Sunday, Tamar’s fever had passed, and a team of doctors decided to send baby and mother home together. Then, though she had no symptoms, her test for Covid-19 came back positive, and the family needed to come up with a plan.

“IF I was positive and my husband was fine, I’d be told to isolate. But we had to approach the situation differently,” Tamar said. “I’m the healthier one. I’m not coughing.”

A study of more than 2,100 pediatric patients in China published in the journal Pediatrics found that more than 90% of cases among children were asymptomatic, mild or moderate, but that infants were particularly vulnerable to infection.
The Weinbergers strategized: Tamar would take care of the baby, wearing a mask while she breastfed; studies suggest mothers can’t pass the virus to infants via breast milk, which helps build the immune system. The nanny, who showed no sign of infection, would help care for the kids. Tamar would pitch in while keeping her distance. Dov would help with homework via FaceTime.

Tamar had ordered groceries online when her husband first fell ill, and friends and family took turns leaving food and other necessities at the door. Her mother bought baby clothes online and had them delivered.

After about a week, Dov’s symptoms lessened, and he emerged from his room and held the baby for the first time; infectious-disease experts currently believe people are most contagious early on in the disease and when they are most symptomatic. Tamar, a week after delivering, started taking the kids out for a few hours a day to play in the yard. Dr. Slavin calls the family every few days, consulting them on potential next steps.

When Dov’s test result finally came back—positive for Covid-19—he was already recovering from the illness.

The family is still trying to keep the baby and older kids separate in case any is infected but, Tamar said, “Now that they’ve met him, they’re dying to hold him.”

The siblings also are eager to learn a key piece of information: the baby’s name. The Weinbergers have the name picked out but won’t divulge it until the bris, which typically occurs eight days after birth. It has been postponed until the interaction is safe for the mohel, who performs the circumcision ceremony.

Overall, the Weinbergers consider themselves lucky. Mom, baby and kids are healthy, and dad is getting better.

“We survived Covid-19,” Tamar said. “And I want a T-shirt.”

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—Daniela Hernandez contributed to this article.

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