

The Impact of Birth Experience & Pain on Breastfeeding Outcomes - A Multi-Country Study of UK and USA Based Mothers

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Introduction

Reasons for premature discontinuation of breastfeeding are complex; however, the majority of research focuses only on the physical challenges of breastfeeding and issues with the breast. This survey-based study investigated how actual experiences of birth and breastfeeding differed from the mother's pre-birth intentions, and any subsequent perceived impact on breastfeeding experience for mothers in both the USA & the United Kingdom.

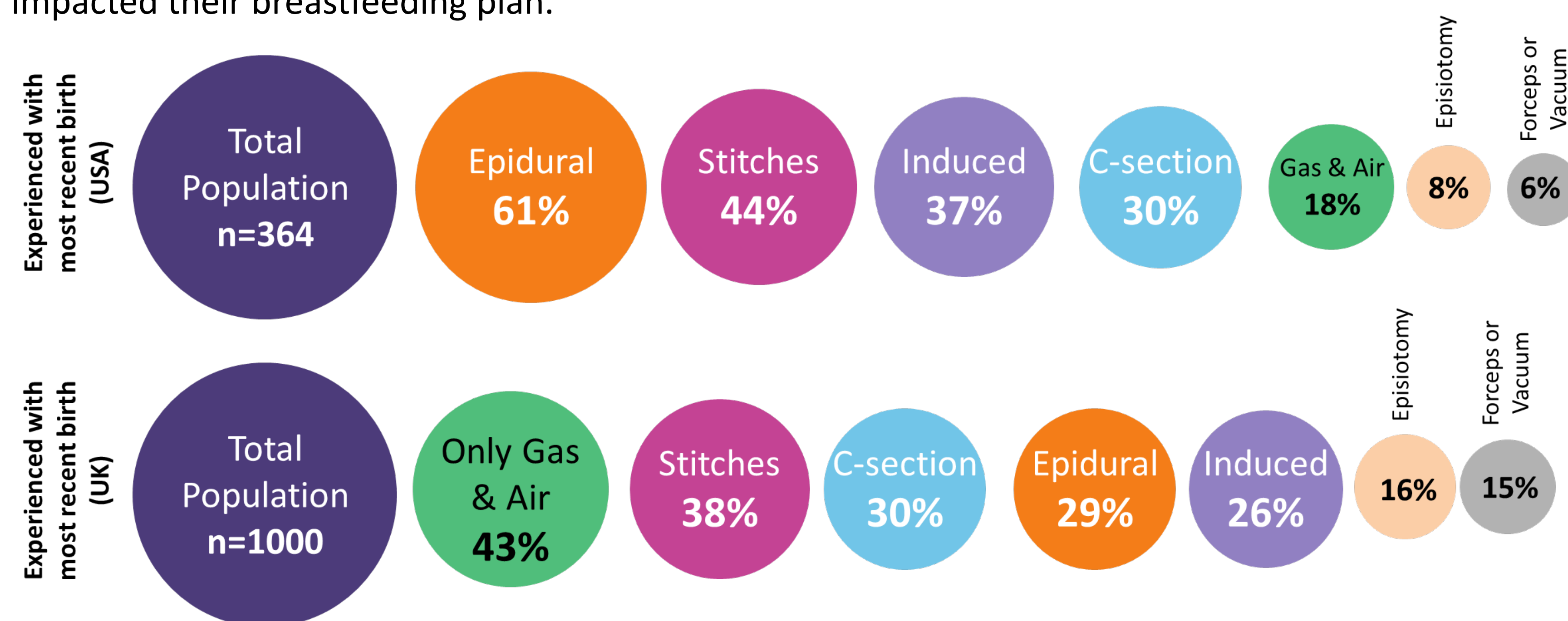
Method

Data were collected through use of an online survey of UK-based ($n=1,000$) and US-based ($n=364$) women. Participants had all given birth to their youngest child within the last 24 months, initiated breastfeeding, and had completed their breastfeeding journey. The survey was divided into two parts, completed a few days apart. The first survey was an attitudinal study examining plans and intentions regarding birth and breastfeeding. The second survey focused on actual experiences of birth, breastfeeding, and the effect of pain relating to the birth.

Results

Birth Experience

Incidence of C-section was similar (30%) for both surveyed populations. However, twice as many women reported receiving an epidural in the USA (61%) than the UK (29%). Additionally, more UK women gave birth using only breathing exercises and/or nitrous oxide to manage pain (43% in the UK compared to 18% in the USA). Only 36% USA/33% UK moms felt their birth went 'very well and to plan'. A higher number (38% in both countries) stated that their birth experience had negatively impacted their breastfeeding plan.



Breastfeeding Intentions and Reality:

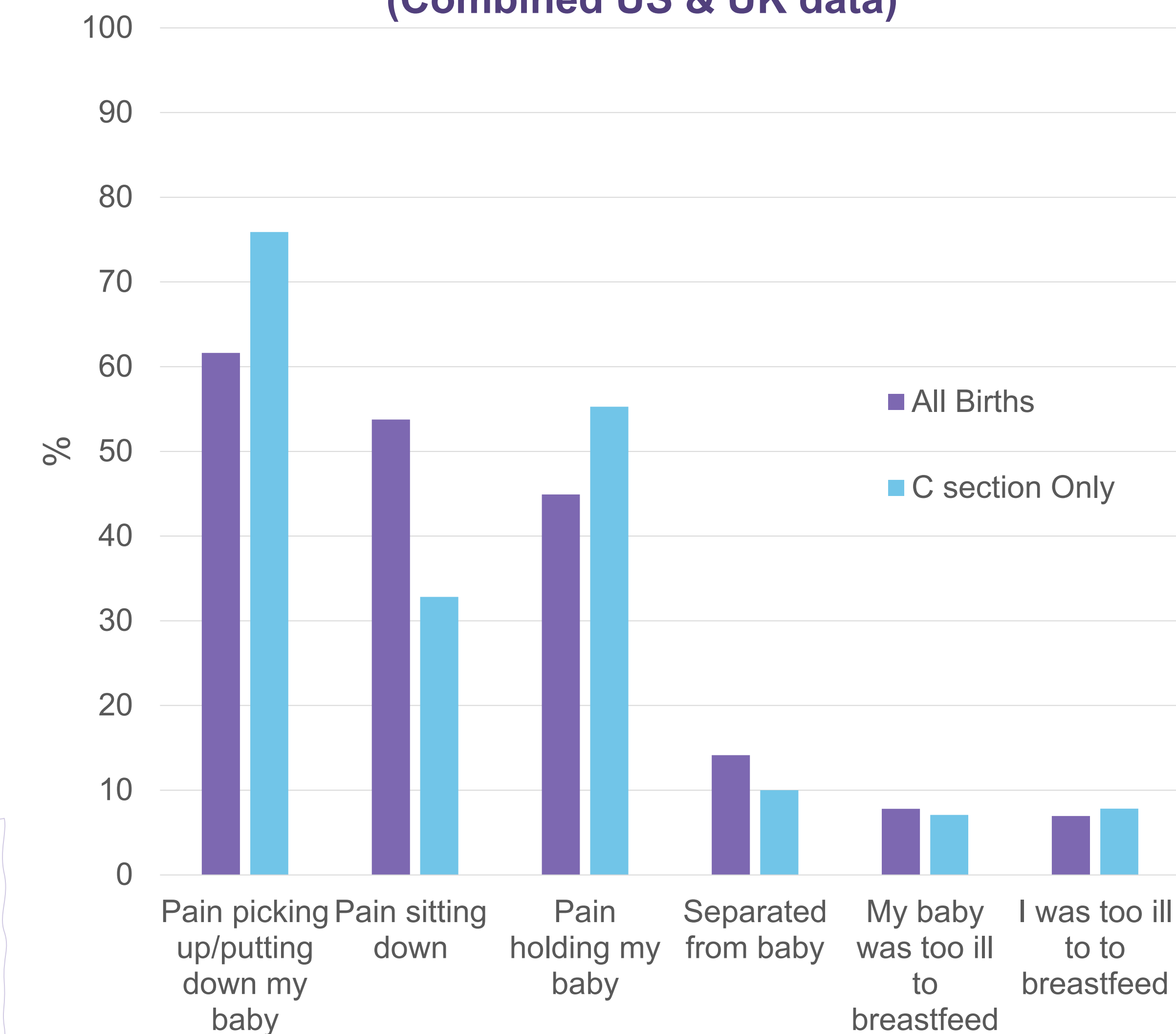
USA moms were more likely to intend to exclusively feed breastmilk (86% versus 66% in the UK); however, in reality, 45% of USA moms & 58% of UK moms used formula in addition to breastmilk at some point in their breastfeeding journey. USA moms also breastfed for longer, with an average length of 46 weeks (50% stopped by 12 months) compared to 28 weeks for UK moms (75% stopped by 12 months).

Impact of pain on breastfeeding

In both populations, around half of respondents couldn't follow their breastfeeding plan, the biggest impact being early cessation of breastfeeding. Pain from birth that impacted breastfeeding affected a quarter of respondents in both populations, making breastfeeding difficult rather than preventing it. C-section was a significant reason for this pain, affecting 55% (USA) and 75% (UK) of respondents who reported birth related pain respectively. Pain when picking up their baby (>60%) was the most common issue, followed by pain when sitting to feed (>50%). Pain when holding the baby to breastfeed was also frequently reported.

36% of US moms whose birth-related pain impacted breastfeeding said it contributed to them stopping earlier than they intended

How did pain impact your breastfeeding? (Combined US & UK data)



Conclusion

There were notable differences in birth & breastfeeding experience in the USA, compared to the UK. However, for both populations, pain relating to the birth led to issues which impacted breastfeeding. Unplanned C-section was commonly associated with pain and a change in breastfeeding plan. Pain relating to birth may be an under-considered factor in early cessation of breastfeeding, and increased support for breastfeeding after C-section may positively impact breastfeeding outcomes in this population.