Stress

This sheet is about stress in pregnancy and while breastfeeding. This information is based on available published literature. It should not take the place of medical care and advice from your healthcare provider.

What is stress?

Stress is the way the body reacts to something that is unusual, dangerous, unknown, or disturbing. Stress can come from any event or thought. When under stress, the body undergoes physical, chemical, and emotional changes. Almost anything can cause stress, and everyone experiences it at some point in their life. Stress can make people feel frustrated, overwhelmed, angry, or nervous. Everyone deals with stress in their own way. A very stressful situation for one person may not be all that stressful for another. Because we all have different reactions to stress, it is hard to study how stress may affect pregnancy or breastfeeding.

What are some of the symptoms of stress?

- Physical symptoms: Chest pain, fast heart rate, breathing problems, headaches, vision problems, teeth grinding, dizziness, fatigue, stomach problems, changes in eating partners, and muscle aches.
- Mental symptoms: Confusion, memory loss, nightmares, problems focusing, having a hard time making decisions, and changes in sleeping patterns.
- Emotional symptoms: Feelings of anxiety, guilt, grief, fear, irritability, worry, frustration, loneliness, or being overwhelmed. May include periods of anger or crying.
- Social symptoms: Staying away from friends and family, eating too much or too little, drinking too much alcohol, and using drugs.

Does stress affect health?

In small amounts, stress can be positive and healthy. However, being under a lot of stress over time might affect health and well-being. Stress can increase a person's chance of developing conditions like high blood pressure or depression. Stress might also cause existing medical problems to worsen. For example, if someone has diabetes and is under stress, it may be hard for them to keep their blood sugar levels under control.

If you are having symptoms of stress, talk with your healthcare provider. It is important to get help from a mental health professional, counselors, or other qualified healthcare provider before your stress level becomes out of control. They can help you find the resources and assistance needed to cope with stress.

Do medications used to treat potential health effects of stress, like high blood pressure, ulcers, or depression, increase risks to my pregnancy?

Many medications can be used during pregnancy. In fact, it may be more harmful to a pregnancy if some conditions are not treated or well-controlled. Contact MotherToBaby to talk with a specialist about specific medication(s) during pregnancy and breastfeeding.

Can stress make it harder for me to get pregnant?

Studies that suggest stress might make it harder to get pregnant. However, these studies have limitations and are not able to give clear guidelines on how different amounts of stress or the length of time a woman is experiencing stress may affect their ability to get pregnant. If you are struggling getting pregnant and this is causing you stress, be sure to talk with your healthcare provider.

I just found out that I am pregnant. What are some ways to lower my stress level?

- Don't be afraid to ask for help.
- Talk about your feelings with people you trust including friends, family, and/or healthcare/mental health professionals.

- Follow good health habits: avoid smoking, drinking alcohol, or taking non-prescription drug; take your prescribed medication as directed; eat a healthy diet; drink plenty of water; rest; and follow an exercise plan approved by your healthcare provider.
- Try to have fun and do things that you enjoy.
- Consider practicing mindfulness or doing meditation.

Does stress increase the chance of miscarriage?

Miscarriage is common and can occur in any pregnancy for many different reasons. It is unknown if stress on its own increases the chance of miscarriage. While studies suggest a lot of stress during pregnancy could increase the chance of miscarriage, it is hard to know if the increased chance is from stress alone or if it is due to other factors.

Does stress increase the chance of birth defects?

Every pregnancy starts with a 3-5% chance of having a birth defect. This is called the background risk. It is hard to measure stress and to study its effects on pregnancy. However, it is unlikely that stress alone will increase the chance of birth defects.

Does stress in pregnancy increase the chance of other pregnancy-related problems?

Some studies suggest that stress can contribute to preterm delivery (birth before week 37) or low birth weight (weighing less than 5 pounds, 8 ounces [2500 grams] at birth). However, because everyone experiences and responds to stressful situations in their own way, there is no clear information on if stress alone increases the chance of these complications.

Does stress in pregnancy affect future behavior or learning for the child?

Some studies have linked stress during pregnancy to an increased chance of the child(ren) developing mental health and behavioral problems later in life. However, there is not enough information to know if it is only stress or other factors that can increase the chance for these issues.

Breastfeeding and stress:

Stress may cause problems with breastfeeding. For some women, breastfeeding itself can feel overwhelming and stressful. It can be helpful for a woman who is breastfeeding to have support while nursing. This can include a breastfeeding support group, a lactation specialist, and/or friends or family members who can give help and support. If you are having trouble breastfeeding, please contact your healthcare provider or your baby's pediatrician. Be sure to talk to your healthcare provider about all your breastfeeding questions.

If a man is stressed, could it affect fertility or increase the chance of birth defects?

Some studies have suggested that stress can affect a man's fertility (ability to get a woman pregnant). In general, exposures that men have are unlikely to increase the risks to a pregnancy. For more information, please see the MotherToBaby fact sheet Paternal Exposures at https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/paternal-exposures-pregnancy/.

Please click here for references.

Questions? Call 866.626.6847 | Text 855.999.3525 | Email or Chat at MotherToBaby.org.

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