Forging Ahead With Facts As Her Fuel

By Jennifer Lemons, MS, CGC, MotherToBaby Texas TIPS

It was the longest 3 minutes of her life. As she opened her eyes to glance at the test, her heart stopped. She couldn't breathe. Frantically, she tore open the instructions that came with the test to confirm what she already knew. She was pregnant. She laid her head on the bathroom stall, tears threatening to fall. It was then that the bell rang, signaling the end of lunch. It was time to go to class. But all she could think was, "I'm only 16…"

May is National Teen Pregnancy Prevention Month, a good time to focus on the specific challenges a young, pregnant mother may face. Teen pregnancy raises a myriad of emotions and thoughts from the most practical of, "How am I going to finish school?" or "What will my parents think?" to the more profound, "Should I even keep it?" or "Could I have harmed the baby somehow?"

When trying to answer these questions, it should come as no surprise that teens are at a high risk for receiving misinformation from many sources, i.e. the internet, friends and media. As a certified genetic counselor at MotherToBaby, this concerns me greatly – for mom's sake, as well as baby's. When somehow that mom-to-be lands on the other end of my phone line, in my office or on the other end of an email, I am relieved. She's found a trustworthy resource available for pregnant teens to help them answer these important, and potentially life-changing, questions.

MotherToBaby, a service of the nonprofit Organization of Teratology Information Specialists (OTIS), provides the most up-to-date, evidence-based information to mothers, healthcare professionals, and the general public about potentially harmful exposures, like alcohol, drugs and medications, during pregnancy and while breastfeeding. Each question that MotherToBaby receives is researched by a professional like me. From questions about bug repellant to illegal drug use, MotherToBaby has seen it all! So, what are some of the most common questions I get from young moms?

ALCOHOL. "Can I drink any alcohol at all during my pregnancy?" No amount of alcohol is safe during pregnancy. However, babies exposed to large amounts of alcohol at one time (i.e. binge drinking) and/or frequently throughout a pregnancy may be at risk for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). Babies with FASD may have one or more of the following: birth defects, intellectual disabilities, learning disorders and/or behavioral problems.

CIGARETTES. "Why can't I smoke cigarettes while I am pregnant?" There are over 4,000 chemicals and toxins in cigarette smoke. Several of these can cross the placenta and decrease the amount of oxygen and nutrients available to baby. Studies on heavy smoking (smoking 15 or more cigarettes per day) during pregnancy have shown an increased risk of oral clefts in newborns, as well as a higher chance for preterm delivery, low-birth weight or miscarriage. Long-term effects have included a higher risk for childhood asthma, bronchitis, and respiratory infections, as well as ADHD. It's never too late to quit smoking – even reducing the number of cigarettes smoked per day will help!

MARIJUANA. "I've heard it is OK to smoke marijuana during pregnancy. Is this true?" There is conflicting information available about the effects of marijuana on a pregnancy. While some recent studies have shown that it has not been associated with an increased risk for birth defects or complications, there is not enough data available to say this with 100% confidence. Additionally, cognitive and behavioral problems have been seen more often in children whose mothers were "heavy" marijuana users (used marijuana one or more times per day). Again, the evidence is not conclusive and some studies report conflicting results. Plus, smoking is smoking, so heavy marijuana use during pregnancy can be associated with many of the same problems as heavy cigarette use.

METHAMPHETAMINES. "I've used methamphetamines in the past. Is this OK to use now and then while I am pregnant?" Methamphetamines (meth) should not be used at any point during pregnancy. Meth use has been associated with an increased risk of miscarriage or preterm delivery. Meth use later in pregnancy has also been associated with babies experiencing withdrawal symptoms after being born. Currently, there is not enough data to know whether meth use during pregnancy increases the risk of birth defects, although heavy use of meth during pregnancy may increase the risk for learning problems.

There's no doubt the road ahead will be filled with many more questions for a young parent, but I'd like to think receiving a reliable personalized risk assessment about exposures during pregnancy and breastfeeding will be the start of an important support system she builds for herself.



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***MotherToBaby** is a service of the international Organization of Teratology Information Specialists (OTIS), a suggested resource by many agencies including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). If you have questions about viruses, alcohol, medications, vaccines, diseases, or other exposures, call MotherToBaby toll-FREE at 866-626-6847 or try out MotherToBaby's new **text counseling service** by texting questions to (855) 999-3525. You can also visit **MotherToBaby.org** to browse a library of fact sheets, **email an expert** or **chat live**.*

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

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