When Counting Sheep Doesn't Work: Insomnia and Pregnancy

By Patricia Markland Cole, MPH, MotherToBaby Massachusetts

During my work at MotherToBaby, I have received calls from pregnant woman who want to know what can they safely take to sleep? Usually they are looking at natural remedies like melatonin for information. For some who have been on medications like Ambien before they were pregnant, they now wonder if they can use it because they are having a hard time catching those Zzzz's. Even though I am not pregnant, I am sure all of us can relate to a night where we wake up and cannot fall back to sleep. We slowly see the time ticking by 10 min, 30 min, 1 hr, 2hrs. It can be so frustrating, especially if you look over at your partner in a state of blissful slumber as you toss back and forth on the bed.

Many women have come to accept a lack of sleep or quality of sleep in pregnancy. In the early part of pregnancy, sleep is interrupted by nausea, vomiting, back pain and an increased need to urinate/pee. In the middle of pregnancy, women are uncomfortable in bed because the baby is moving and kicking, and then there is heartburn, cramps or tingling in the legs.

By the latter part of pregnancy, it is reported that over 97% of pregnant women cannot get a decent night's sleep. They are waking up and staying awake for longer periods of time. I do recall how surprised I was when I sent an email to one of my colleagues at MothertoBaby in her third trimester of pregnancy, at the crack of dawn her time (I was on the East Coast, she was on the West). I was so surprised when she responded to my email and I knew it was way too early for her to be at the office. When I asked, she stated, she was up and couldn't sleep and decided to make the most of her time. While many women and clinicians have come to accept this as just a part of pregnancy, the data is starting to show that we need to pay more attention to how pregnant women are sleeping during pregnancy.

What is Insomnia?
Insomnia is one of 3 common sleep disorders during pregnancy. Insomnia includes difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep, waking up very early in the morning, waking up not feeling rested or a combination of these symptoms. Many pregnant women do not view insomnia as a disorder or a problem in their pregnancy, but when it starts to impact how you function during the day especially when it is accompanied with sleepiness, lack of energy, increased irritability, agitation and stress, it should be considered more carefully especially if insomnia starts to occur more regularly and last longer. Having a good night's rest is important for the well-being of the mother and child.

The concern with persistent insomnia is that it could increase the chance of hypertension and diabetes, which is just as concerning in people who aren't pregnant too. Another concern is that people who suffer from insomnia have higher levels of substances that increase inflammation in the body (proinflammatory cytokines). These higher levels of cytokines are also seen in women who have experienced preterm birth, postpartum depression and other pregnancy complications. While no association with insomnia and adverse pregnancy effects have been made, researchers have started to take a closer look at the effects of insomnia due to some results. For instance one report observed a higher rate of preterm birth for pregnant women that were sleeping less than 5 hours a night in the latter part of pregnancy. And there were other observations that women who were sleeping less than 5 hours a night in the last month of pregnancy had longer labors and were more likely to have C-sections.

In light of these observations, health care providers are being asked to screen their patients for sleep disorders during pregnancy. The majority of pregnant women consider their insomnia to be mild but in some cases there could be more that is going on like undiagnosed depression or anxiety that can be responsible for the insomnia.

So what's a tired mom-to-be to do?
Expectant mothers can do their part by being more proactive. It is suggested that expectant moms keep a daily sleep diary which would include your bedtime routine, how long it takes you to fall asleep, if you have difficulty falling back to sleep after waking up, how long you are awake at night and if you feel rested. Talk with your health care provider even if they have not brought it up with you. Sometimes changes in behavior can help, called 'sleep hygiene' which involves things like avoiding stimulants (caffeine), not eating late at night, getting exposure to adequate sunlight and using your bed for only sleeping (not watching TV). Other actions that pregnant women can try includes acupuncture,

massage, yoga and exercise. In some cases a referral to a sleep specialist may be needed and if all else fails some women may require medications.

Sometimes moms start looking at a natural remedy like melatonin. Melatonin, a hormone that is produced by the pineal gland, is often taken as a supplement to help with sleep. Melatonin is available in two forms, either as a synthetic product or a product that is from animals, usually beef cattle. Most health care professionals recommend avoiding the melatonin from animals due to a very small chance of contamination or viral transmission. Also, melatonin is a supplement and not a medication. That means it's not regulated by the Food and Drug Administration. Some studies have suggested avoiding use of melatonin during pregnancy due to a concern that the exposure might interfere with mom's or baby's sleep cycles.

Others want to know about prescription medications, like Ambien (zolpidem). Ambien has not been shown to increase the risk for birth defects when used in the first trimester of pregnancy. Since Ambien is a sedative hypnotic type of medicine, and has some features similar to benzodiazepines, it is thought that when used near the time of delivery, there may be temporary withdrawal-like symptoms in the baby.

Overall it is important to develop a plan with your health care provider and if a medication is needed, you can call MothertoBaby and we can provide information on medications suggested for use in pregnancy. Remember do not take sleeping lightly during your pregnancy; as one commentator put it, you are "sleeping for two." You, your baby and even your partner will appreciate your effort.



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