Behind the Scenes at MotherToBaby

Did you know that 70% of pregnant women take at least one prescribed medication? And that 90% take any medication during pregnancy? How do you know if it is safe for a pregnant woman to take these medicines?

MotherToBaby Teratogen Information Specialists (TIS) are experts at answering questions about any possible increased risk of taking an over-the-counter (OTC) or prescribed medication, as well as any other exposures! A teratogen is something that can increase the risk for birth defects to the developing baby, and other problems such as a smaller baby or early delivery, when exposure occurs during pregnancy. Special intensive training is required to become a TIS, before we are able to answer the questions of healthcare providers, pregnant and lactating women, their relatives and partners, prospective adoptive parents, and the public. We get calls from people of all ages, teens up to older adults, even prospective grandparents. Teratogen specialists learn how to investigate the question, summarize the data, and then communicate it in a way that is easily understood. Every contact is a little different because each scenario is different, but that makes each day endlessly fascinating for those at MotherToBaby who respond to your inquires.

This work is different than the work of other healthcare providers such as a genetic counselor, midwife or obstetrician – we don't generally delve into family history, and we don't make direct recommendations. We try to be reassuring as we give you the most up-to-date exposure information. We consider the potential effects of taking AND not taking a medication, herbal supplement, or OTC drug. There are important considerations when someone is planning a pregnancy, facing a newly discovered pregnancy or an unanticipated pregnancy, dealing with worsening mental or physical health conditions, or with the sudden diagnosis of a birth defect or pregnancy loss.

We answer questions from prospective adoptive parents who may only have 36 hours to decide if they will accept a baby whose biological mom used heroin, methamphetamine or alcohol in pregnancy. We listen to pregnant callers worried about the substantial alcohol they drank or the marijuana they used before getting a positive pregnancy test. We also answer questions from people worried about Zika virus exposure on their honeymoons. And common questions these days involve the COVID-19 virus and the COVID vaccines and booster shoots given at any time in pregnancy or while breastfeeding.

Teratogen specialists also get calls about the potential consequences of pain medications for those who are pregnant and facing surgery such as a pre-op visit for a herniated disc – and are in excruciating pain. We have numerous conversations with lactating women who were advised to "pump and dump" after dental work or general anesthesia, or CT scans and we are able to discuss why this dated practice is usually unnecessary. Some women call repeatedly due to anxiety or simply because our TIS team has reliable expertise. We also answer breastfeeding questions about COVID-19 and the vaccines, prescriptions and OTC medications, or how much of a drug gets into breastmilk. And we get questions from pregnant and postpartum individuals who are trying to avoid using inhalers or taking their anxiety/nausea/ADHD medications. We share the research and reassure them that some health conditions need to be treated with medications because it's best for mom and baby. Some conversations are more sensitive – such as women with a history of multiple miscarriages, IVF, or other high-risk pregnancies who are trying to make only the best choices in a high-stakes stressful time. Sometimes there are tears, and that's OK.

Often, we talk about the benefits to the individual of taking/using the medication or other product, versus any possible risks to the pregnancy or the baby. We tell them to consider the long view, that as a parent, you will be making "risk vs. benefit" decisions for nearly the next two decades for the child growing inside you. So, it's important for you to make a choice now that gives you a good quality of life, and also to consider every aspect of the consequences for you both mentally and physically. In addition, it is in the important input of your partner and your healthcare providers.

It is a privilege to be part of the lives of all those who come to MotherToBaby for information. We are sensitive to different cultures, backgrounds, sexual orientation, and gender identification. We have 12 affiliate offices in the US and one in Canada. We provide information by phone, text, email, and live chat, and because we work across three times zones, we can respond quickly!

Affiliate offices are based in universities, academic medical centers, or health departments. Our multi-disciplinary team of Teratogen Information Specialists includes genetic counselors, nurses, doctors, and others with a master's degree or Master of Public Health specifically. We also provide services in Spanish. We meet at least annually for training plus more often within our own institutions to discuss new publications and developments in the field.

Please spread the word. We welcome your inquiries!

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

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