Coming to America Pregnant

Last year I was pregnant with my first child. At the same time, I was going through the immigration process to apply for permanent residency in the United States. I wasn't aware of the many things that you must do to get your health records cleared by immigration and how that process can be a great source of anxiety during pregnancy. If you are an immigrant, you may not have health insurance or cannot understand the language, which can be another challenge. In order to have sound and scientifically true advice during that critical period, I always consulted with my doctor and then MotherToBaby.

First, I was told that I needed to get revaccinated for certain diseases, even though I may have had them or may have been previously vaccinated in the past. Those vaccinations included measles, mumps and rubella (MMR), varicella, polio, tetanus diphtheria pertussis (Tdap), hepatitis B, and COVID-19. As soon as I heard this long list, I went online and checked the MotherToBaby facts sheets about those vaccines one by one to see what was known about their use in pregnancy. It turns out the Hepatitis B and COVID-19 vaccines are not associated with risk during pregnancy. Even more, it is recommended to get a Tdap vaccine during pregnancy to provide protective antibodies to your baby against pertussis (whopping cough). Live vaccines like MMR and varicella (chickenpox) are not recommended during pregnancy. Thankfully I was able to get bloodwork done to check antibody levels (protective proteins) showing prior protection. If you can show full protection, you no longer need to get vaccinated for these diseases after pregnancy.

One other thing I had to find out was my tuberculosis (TB) status. This is done by blood work, but if the results don't rule out the disease, you would need a lung x-ray. In general, X-rays are not recommended during pregnancy. However, if needed, studies show that a single chest x-ray is not associated with an increased risk for birth defects or pregnancy complications for the developing baby. It is important to know your tuberculosis status before pregnancy since active infection can be associated with preterm labor (early birth before 37 weeks), low birth weight of the baby, or even maternal death. Getting TB treated as soon as possible, even when you are pregnant, is so important. Tuberculosis is a slow-growing, pesky disease that is common in certain countries, including my home country, Turkey, but not common in the United States. That is why it is important to get it checked during the immigration process to prevent spread.

In addition to making sure I was getting my immigration to-do list sorted out, I also had to contend with new feelings brought on by pregnancy, both happy and stressful ones. This included all day nausea, aka the morning sickness, I had lots and lots of morning sickness. My first instinct was to call my mom and ask for help. She gave me a recipe for a concoction that included turmeric, sage, ginger, and mistletoe. I made it and drank it a couple of times without thinking whether that might be safe during pregnancy since it was all natural and herbal. A few days later, I was talking with one of my best friends, who was pregnant as well, complaining about morning sickness and asking for suggestions that have helped her. She said she would not drink any herbal tea without checking with her doctor. Ding ding, after talking with her, I was terrified to research the topic, and when I did, it confirmed my worst fears. The mistletoe in my nausea drink might cause miscarriage if consumed in large amounts. Many of the other herbs hadn't been studied in pregnancy at all. I didn't consume any more of the morning sickness drink and am fortunate that I had a healthy term baby. Lesson learned!

As immigrants, we bring our full heritage with us and try to combine the best of both worlds. Those herbal remedies and recipes are our culture; however, pregnancy is a special and very vulnerable time period. Everybody should be cautious about what we put into our bodies, especially herbal remedies since they are mostly not well studied during pregnancy to show whether they are associated with risks to the baby or not. Even if they are studied, the production and harvesting are not regulated or controlled by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), or other governmental agencies, and contaminations might happen. Better safe than sorry, right?

Carrying my baby through the immigration process and following my dreams along the way was challenging, but I learned on that road that it is important to question my customs and traditional medications when pregnant. Not everything my mother or grandmother did is safe and effective. Also, I was glad that MotherToBaby was there for me when I was going through the immigration process while pregnant to ask my burning questions about vaccinations and x-rays.

Anyone with questions about herbals, vaccines, TB testing, or any other exposure in pregnancy should know that MotherToBaby is a great resource. Call or chat today to get your individual questions answered by a teratogen information specialist so you can rest assured that you and your baby can have a healthy and well-informed entry into America.

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

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