Keeping Your Cool During Pregnancy When Fire Season Heats Up

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With wildfires seemingly becoming a year-round problem, pregnant women have more questions than ever before about exposure to smoke and lingering poor air quality. Understanding the possible risks from a fire during pregnancy or while breastfeeding can help people make informed decisions when the unthinkable happens. Here are some commonly asked questions we receive at MotherToBaby about wildfires.

Q. What is in the air from the fires?
A wildfire produces particulate matter (a combination of dirt, soil dust, pollens, molds, ashes, and soot), in addition to other chemicals. The particulate matter can be different sizes. Particles less than 10 micrometers in diameter pose the greatest problems, because they can get deep into your lungs, and some may even enter your bloodstream. Contents of the smoke can vary based on what is being burned. In some instances, wildfire smoke can contain heavy metals such as lead. Wildfire smoke also contains carbon monoxide.

Q. I'm pregnant. How does the particulate matter affect my pregnancy? What about the carbon monoxide?
Experts tell us that the smaller the particulate matter, the worse the effects on health, including difficulty breathing, aggravated asthma, and increased risk of heart attack and death due to respiratory and cardiovascular problems. Although we do not know enough about how exposure to particulates can impact a pregnancy, it makes sense for all individuals to take extra precautions to reduce their exposure to wildfire smoke.

Carbon monoxide is a gas that enters into the lungs and blood and displaces oxygen to both mom and baby. The greater the exposure and the longer the exposure, the higher the risk. Studies suggest that there may be a higher chance of birth defects when a woman is exposed to carbon monoxide in the first trimester, but more studies are needed. Other studies have found that exposure to wildfire smoke can increase the risk for preterm delivery and low birth weight. However, this finding may be more related to the stress a woman experiences during a fire, or a combination of factors, than the actual smoke exposure. Again, more research is needed.

Q. I have asthma and I'm pregnant. Do I have added risks?
Yes. Studies in non-pregnant women tell us that exposure to particulate matter of 10 micrometers in diameter or less can make asthma symptoms worse. Pregnancy would not protect you and it may even put you at higher risk of having an asthma attack depending on how far along you are. See our fact sheet on asthma here.

Depending on your proximity to the fire zone, it may be difficult to get help if your symptoms worsen. First responders may be busy fighting the fires and evacuating residents and may not get to you as quickly as you need. Emergency rooms may be overrun. For this reason, it is very important to always have your asthma medication with you so that if the smoke exacerbates your symptoms you can start to treat yourself. You also want to be in contact with your doctor and move away from the source of the wildfires as soon as possible.

Q. I'm pregnant and work outdoors. Do I need a mask?
The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has recommendations about what masks to use to protect against particulate matter entering the lungs. The goal is to prevent or reduce exposure as much as possible. If you work indoors, for the most part you are protected. If you work outdoors, you may want to consider using a mask that fits correctly and has two head straps to hold it in place. It should be labeled "particulate respirator" and it should have been tested or approved by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). Learn more here. Since pregnancy can alter your lung function, pregnant women may have a harder time breathing to begin with. For that reason, it's important to check in with your healthcare provider before using a particulate respirator.

If you are concerned about your work conditions, NIOSH offers a program called The Health Hazard Evaluation Program. This program helps employees learn whether health hazards are present at their workplace and recommends ways to reduce hazards and prevent work-related illness. Learn more here.

Q. I live about 50 miles from the wildfires. Do I still have to be concerned about being outdoors?

Depending on where you live and the direction of the wind, the air quality in your area may be poor due to the wildfire, even if the fire isn't that close to you. Listen to the local health and environmental officials, and avoid exercising outdoors, gardening, or performing other activities that may cause you to exert yourself and inhale more of the particulates in the air. If you have any doubts, wait until the wildfires have been extinguished and the air quality is back to normal.

Q: Can fires cause other problems for pregnant women?
Depending on weather conditions, wildfires can spread rapidly. The stress of having to make life and death choices, or the decision to leave your home and decide what items to take with very short notice, all produce tremendous stress. It is absolutely normal to feel sad, stressed, anxious, or scared. In pregnancy, depending on how long the stress is present and the level of stress, it is possible that there could be impacts on the developing baby, so anything you can do to try to reduce stress is always a good idea. Take a look at our fact sheet on stress for more information:

Q: I'm pregnant. What if I have to evacuate?
The best thing that you can do is have a plan in place ahead of time. Make a checklist of items to take with you should you need to evacuate your home. Assemble an emergency supply kit and store it in a location where you can easily get to it, and create a family communication plan.

When the time comes to evacuate, stay calm. Be sure to bring any medications that you take on a daily basis (including your prenatal vitamins). Stay well hydrated, continue to eat, and rest as much as you can. If you have to check into a shelter, tell the staff there that you are pregnant so they can make any necessary accommodations.

While making it to your prenatal check-up is probably the last thing on your mind in the midst of an evacuation, it's important that you continue to be seen by your OB/GYN or midwife. Some individuals may be displaced from their homes for an extended period of time, however, it's important to keep attending your prenatal care visits to make sure that baby is growing and developing properly.

If you're close to your due date, check to make sure your hospital or birthing center is not in the mandatory evacuation zone. If it is located close to the fires, the staff and patients there may be asked to evacuate, and you may need to deliver at a different hospital. Knowing this information before you go into labor will reduce any unnecessary stress.

Q: What other steps can I take to minimize my exposure to smoke from a fire?
Stay indoors when possible, and keep your windows and doors closed. If available, an air purifier can help with indoor air quality. If you have to drive somewhere, keep your windows rolled up and use the air conditioner to stay cool. If your car has a button that recirculates air internally, make sure it is turned on. Pregnant women who must venture outdoors may also consider wearing a mask. Although any protection is helpful, a N95 particulate respirator works best to filter out harmful particulate matter.

Q. I'm breastfeeding and I'm concerned about the wildfires in my area
Breastfeeding moms can also face challenges of their own when they have to evacuate their homes. When possible, follow the steps outlined above to reduce exposure to the wildfire smoke for both you and baby.

The benefits of breastfeeding are well known, and in most cases individuals are encouraged to continue to breastfeed their babies even when faced with an emergency like a fire. Women who are nursing should focus on staying well hydrated and continue to feed baby on demand.

For moms that choose to pump breast milk, extra batteries may be something worth packing in your emergency supply kit in case the power goes out. For babies that are formula fed, it's important to bring bottled water.

Q: Where can I learn more about fires currently happening and about air quality where I live?

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service reports on large fires nationally. The EPA also has a website where you can check the air quality index in your local area. Pregnant women should follow instructions laid out for "sensitive individuals." Lastly, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has more helpful information about wildfire exposure during pregnancy here.

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

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