Screening Your Sunscreen During Pregnancy

As the famous song croons, “Summertime and the living is easy….” Summer is finally here! COVID-19 has interfered with outdoor gatherings, but people are starting to venture out…with good social distancing, of course! Outdoor activities mean more sun exposure, and healthcare providers recommend protecting your skin from the sun. These recommendations stem from concerns that the sun’s UV (ultraviolet) rays can damage the skin and increase the risk for skin cancer and early aging. Studies show that an exposure as short as 15 minutes in duration can cause skin damage.

Sunscreen and Pregnancy

Pregnant women often ask MotherToBaby about whether sunscreen is ok to use during pregnancy. The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulates sunscreen ingredients to ensure safety and effectiveness. The FDA is currently in the process of updating requirements, so stay tuned for news on that front. The FDA reminds us that, “Given the recognized public health benefits of sunscreen use, Americans should continue to use sunscreen with other sun protective measures as this important rulemaking effort moves forward.”

What’s in Sunscreen?

There are two types of UV rays that cause skin damage: UV-A and UV-B. Sunscreens that protect against both types of rays are called ‘broad spectrum’. There are many different active ingredients in sunscreens sold in the US. Some contain chemicals like oxybenzone, an agent banned in some areas because it is harmful to coral. It used to be thought that because they were applied topically to the skin, sunscreens did not end up in the bloodstream. However, several recent studies have found that there is some absorption of sunscreen chemicals through the skin, although in relatively small amounts. Many of these sunscreen chemicals have not been studied very well in pregnancy, although they are not known to have a negative effect on the pregnancy or baby. Aside from active sunscreen ingredients, many products contain other ingredients such as CBD oil (made from the marijuana plant) that have not been studied well in pregnancy. Read the label! Apply your sunscreen properly and then wash your hands.

Alternatives

One alternative is to use a mineral sunscreen such as titanium dioxide and zinc oxide. These are physical blocking agents and stay on top of the skin. That means they are not absorbed through the skin and may be a good choice. These mineral sunscreens are best applied as a lotion rather than a spray since they may be a hazard when inhaled.

Also, limit your exposure by using a hat and other protective clothing, and not going out in the sun during peak hours (between 10a – 2p).

Our last bit of advice? Enjoy your summer!

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

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As a teratogen information specialist, I provide the most up-to-date information about exposures during pregnancy, breastfeeding, before pregnancy or in cases of adoption. Over the years, I have been asked questions about hair dye, heroin, and lots of things in between. I never thought I would be getting questions from multiple people about tear gas and pepper spray exposure during pregnancy. But here we are.

Protests happening in many cities in the United States right now are resulting in some exposure to riot control agents such as tear gas and pepper spray. Even if women who know they are pregnant do not participate in a protest, about 50% of pregnancies in the US are unplanned. This means some women who are participating in the protests may not even know they are pregnant at the time of exposure.

Common protest-related exposures that we have been asked about include:

Tear Gas

There are multiple chemicals in tear gas. It can cause tearing of the eyes, irritation of mucous membranes, cough, difficulty breathing and irritation to the skin. A common chemical in tear gas is called 2-chlorobenzalmalononitrile (also called o-chlorobenzylidene malononitrile or CS for short).

In every pregnancy, a woman starts out with a 3-5% chance of having a baby with a birth defect. This is called her background risk. Based on the very limited information we have, exposure to CS gas is not expected to increase the chance of birth defects over the background risk. A report looking at CS exposure found no major increases in miscarriages, stillbirths, or birth defects.

Pepper Spray

The active ingredient in pepper spray is capsaicin, a chemical that comes from chili peppers. Effects from pepper spray exposure can include irritation of the eyes, skin, and mucous membranes, coughing, and trouble breathing or speaking. Like tear gas, there is very limited information on the use of capsaicin in pregnancy and from what we do know, it is not expected to increase the chance of birth defects over the background risk. Please see our fact sheet on capsaicin for more information.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has more information on riot control agents such as tear gas and pepper spray, as well as tips on how you can protect yourself and what to do if you are exposed.

Trauma

Trauma can be caused by physical injury, such as being hit (by a hand or fist or by objects such as a baton or a rubber bullet) or falling. Trauma can also be psychological, which can stem from violence or from mental/emotional stress. There are individual reports of babies born with and without birth defects following trauma. Pregnancy outcomes may differ based on the type of trauma experienced and based on the severity of the trauma. Our fact sheet on trauma has more information.

Stress

For most of us, stress is a part of “normal” life. However, the world is anything but normal right now. While it is unlikely that stress alone will increase the chance of birth defects, being under a lot of stress over time can affect your health and well-being. Stress can increase the chance for developing conditions such as high blood pressure or depression. If you already have medical problems, stress may make them worse. If stress is causing you to have any medical problems, it’s suggested that you talk to your healthcare provider. More information about stress during pregnancy and breastfeeding can be found in our fact sheet.

COVID-19

As crowds gather, it’s important to practice social distancing and other safety techniques to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Please visit our MotherToBaby Fact Sheet on COVID-19 in pregnancy for recent information.

Of course, it’s suggested for women who are pregnant to minimize these exposures as much as possible. However, sometimes it’s unavoidable. Just know that even during these troubled times, if you have questions for us at MotherToBaby, we are here to answer them as best we can.

We’re all in this together. Please be safe out there.

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