From Diapers to Decisions: MotherToBaby & NDBN Tackle Parents' Top Concerns

By Lorrie Harris-Sagaribay, MPH, President of OTIS/MotherToBaby, in partnership with Joanne Samuel Goldblum, CEO and founder of National Diaper Bank Network.

MotherToBaby is proud to partner with the National Diaper Bank Network (NDBN) as the organization marks its 15th anniversary in 2026 – celebrating a decade and a half of supporting families across the country by ensuring access to diapers and other essential material needs. Through our partnership, we've learned that many parents and caregivers, especially those who are pregnant or caring for newborns, often ask the same kinds of questions about everyday exposures during pregnancy and lactation.

These concerns come straight from the field, as NDBN staff and volunteers working directly with families hear questions like these every day. To help answer them, MotherToBaby experts weigh in on some of the families' most common questions about pregnancy and breastfeeding exposures.

First, it's important to remember that birth defects can happen in any pregnancy for different reasons. Out of all babies born each year, about 3 out of 100 (3%) will have a birth defect. Pregnancy problems (like miscarriage) can also happen in any pregnancy. MotherToBaby looks at research studies to understand if a certain exposure could increase the chance of birth defects or other problems in a pregnancy.

Here are five of the exposures that NBDN families ask about most frequently:

1. Caffeine

During pregnancy, it's recommended to keep your caffeine intake to less than 200 milligrams (mg) per day from all sources, including coffee, tea, energy drinks, and chocolate. (For reference, an 8-ounce cup of brewed coffee can contain 70 to 140 mg of caffeine, depending on the type of coffee and how it is brewed.) During breastfeeding, it's been suggested to stay under 300 mg per day, although that amount might be too high when the baby is very young (it takes young babies much longer than adults to process, or metabolize, caffeine). Even some older babies can be more sensitive to caffeine than others are. If you notice that your baby seems jittery, irritable, or wide awake in the middle of the night after you drink caffeine, you could consider cutting back.

Let's talk more about ***energy drinks***. Most energy drinks contain not only caffeine, sugar, and B vitamins, but also herbal ingredients that most likely haven't been studied in pregnancy or breastfeeding. This means there is no information about how much of these ingredients might reach the developing baby during pregnancy or get into the breast milk. For this reason, it might be preferred to hold off on energy drinks until you aren't pregnant or breastfeeding any longer.

2. Over-the-Counter Pain Medications

Two of the most common over-the-counter pain medications are acetaminophen (such as Tylenol®) and ibuprofen (such as Advil®). These pain relievers are also found in multi-symptom products, such as cold medications. During pregnancy, using acetaminophen for a short time when directed by a healthcare provider to treat pain or fever has not been shown to increase pregnancy risks. Acetaminophen should be used as directed and only for as long as you need it to treat your condition. Ibuprofen, on the other hand, is typically not recommended in pregnancy, especially in the second half of pregnancy, unless your healthcare provider has specifically advised using it.

During breastfeeding though, acetaminophen and ibuprofen can both be used as directed without expected side effects for the baby. The amount of acetaminophen or ibuprofen that gets into the breast milk is much less than the dose that could be given directly to an infant.

3. Fish and Mercury

You might have heard a rumor that eating fish is not a good idea during pregnancy. But this is not the case. While it's true that most fish could contain some amount of mercury (or more specifically, a form of mercury called methylmercury), these amounts are often too small to increase pregnancy risks as long as you make thoughtful choices about eating fish.

The amount of methylmercury in fish gets higher as fish move up the food chain. Big predatory fish that eat smaller fish usually have higher levels of methylmercury. These big fish include swordfish, marlin, bigeye tuna, and king mackerel, among others. These fish should be avoided during pregnancy and while breastfeeding.

Other kinds of fish can be enjoyed in moderation (1 to 3 servings per week, depending on the kind of fish and where it is caught). The U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA) and United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) developed a helpful guide that lists many kinds of fish and gives advice on how often they can be eaten by women who are pregnant or breastfeeding and by children ages 1-11 years: https://www.fda.gov/food/consumers/advice-about-eating-fish.

4. Cleaning Products

Is it better to use natural cleaning products like vinegar during pregnancy or while breastfeeding? What about when you have a young child in the home?

The way you use a cleaning product is usually more important than what the product is. Although using vinegar as a cleaner isn't expected to increase risks during pregnancy or while breastfeeding, there could be some surfaces or situations that require more effective products for sanitizing and disinfecting. In order for a chemical to be able to reach a developing baby during pregnancy or to get into the breast milk, the chemical first has to be circulating in your bloodstream. As long as a product is used in a well-ventilated area (open doors or windows, turn on fans) and your skin is protected from direct contact with the cleaner, then using the cleaner as directed is unlikely to result in an exposure that would get into your bloodstream. If you start to feel any symptoms, such as nausea, dizziness, or headache, increase ventilation in the area and get some fresh air. If you do use vinegar to clean, be sure not to mix it with

ammonia or other chemicals, as that can create harmful fumes. With any cleaning product, follow the directions on the label for how to use and store it.

As far as what kinds of cleaners are preferred when you have young children in the home, that is a great question to talk about with your child's healthcare provider.

5. Animal Dander/Feces

Common household pets like dogs, cats, and rodents tend to be furry. Although pet dander itself is not known to be harmful during pregnancy or while breastfeeding, dander could increase the chance of breathing problems if you have significant allergies or asthma. If you are experiencing worsening symptoms of allergies or asthma during your pregnancy, be sure to talk about it with your healthcare provider. It's also a good idea to wash your hands after handling any kind of rodent, even sweet, furry, household pets.

What about animal feces? It's best to avoid direct contact with any animal feces during pregnancy. This means you get a free pass on cleaning the gerbil cage or scooping the litterbox, if possible. Cat feces, in particular, can contain a parasite responsible for an infection called toxoplasmosis, especially if the cat is allowed outside or is fed raw meat. A toxoplasmosis infection during pregnancy increases the chance of pregnancy complications, and could even pass to the fetus. There's no need to rehome your cat or avoid petting it, but you should avoid direct contact with the cat's feces while you are pregnant.

Closing Thoughts

Through our partnership with NDBN, MotherToBaby is committed to answering the real questions families are asking—accurately, clearly, and compassionately. We know that parents want the best for their babies, and they deserve trusted, evidence-based information to make informed choices.

If you or someone you know has questions about exposures while pregnant or breastfeeding, you can contact a MotherToBaby specialist for free and confidential information via phone, text, or chat at MotherToBaby.org.

Together with NDBN, we'll continue listening, learning, and supporting families when it matters most.

More About the National Diaper Bank Network

The National Diaper Bank Network (NDBN) leads a nationwide movement dedicated to helping individuals, children and families access the basic necessities they require to thrive and reach their full potential…including clean, dry diapers, period supplies and other basic needs. Launched in 2011 with the support of founding sponsor Huggies®, NDBN is dedicated to creating awareness of diaper need/diaper insecurity and advocating for public policy to end it. The Network is made up of more than 300 basic needs banks serving local communities throughout the U.S. More information on NDBN and diaper need is available at nationaldiaperbanknetwork.org, and on Twitter (@DiaperNetwork), Instagram (@DiaperNetwork) and Facebook (facebook.com/NationalDiaperBankNetwork).

From Diapers to Decisions: MotherToBaby & NDBN Tackle Parents' Top Concerns

By Lindsey Morse, MS, CGC, MotherToBaby New York

It's officially summer! Time for pool parties, cook-outs, and beach-side picnics. Bring on the hamburgers and hotdogs, potato and pasta salads, fish fry, and barbecue chicken.

You may be wondering if it is safe to eat that food that has been sitting in the sun? Also, didn't I hear somewhere that pregnant women shouldn't eat fish or undercooked meat during pregnancy? Is it safe to swim in lake water or at the beach? How can I protect my baby during my pregnancy while still enjoying summertime fun and food with my family and friends?

Easy! There are just a few simple tips to keep in mind.

Tip 1 – Thoroughly cook all meat and seafood
Food safety is important whether you are pregnant or not. But some food-borne illnesses can be more of a concern if you are pregnant. Safe handling, preparation, and storage of foods reduces the chance that you could be exposed to little organisms that could make you feel bad in a big way.

One of the most common questions about food during pregnancy is about eating meat, especially deli sandwich meat, or undercooked meat (like that medium-rare steak). There are all these warnings about what to eat and what not to eat. So, how do you know what is a concern and what can you do about it?

Well, there are several microorganisms (bacteria and parasites) that can be found in meat before it's cooked, if it's only partially cooked, or if it has been cooked and then frozen or refrigerated to be eaten later. These include things like Escherichia coli (E. coli), Salmonella, Listeria, and Vibrio. (See MotherToBaby.org for more info in our fact sheets.) Some types, or strains, of these microorganisms are not harmful and are actually good for us, helping with digestion for example. But others can make you sick causing stomach cramps, diarrhea, vomiting, joint and muscle pain, and fever. Symptoms may last only a few hours with some infections or up to a week with others. In women who are pregnant, exposure to some microorganisms might make you sick, but are unlikely to directly affect the baby's development. Other microorganisms may increase the chance for miscarriage or other pregnancy complications, like early delivery.

You may have heard that women who are pregnant should not clean out their cat's litter box due to a risk of toxoplasmosis, but did you know that this same parasite, Toxoplasma gondii, is also found in undercooked meats?

When moms are infected during pregnancy, there is a chance for congenital toxoplasmosis in their babies. This can cause liver, spleen, heart, brain, and eye problems including blindness, deafness, seizures, and cognitive delays. This is usually only a risk with a new infection during pregnancy, not if you have had toxoplasmosis in the past.

Cooking meat and seafood until the center reaches a safe minimum temperature or reheating meat destroys the bacteria or parasite, thereby preventing illness. While great chefs will tell you all sorts of tips and tricks for determining how done your steak is, invest in a meat thermometer! They are easy to find in most grocery stores and really take the guess work out of not only your next backyard party but also your weeknight dinners. Below is a table with the recommended temperatures for different meats. You can find our fact sheet on meat and seafood at https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/eating-raw-undercooked-or-cold-meats-and-seafood/.

Meat/Seafood	Safe Minimum Internal Temperature
Fish and Shellfish	145 °F (63°C)
Pork	145 °F (63°C)
Beef (steaks, chops, and roasts)	145 °F (63°C)
Beef and Pork (ground)	160 °F (71°C)
Wild game	165 °F (74°C)
Poultry	165 °F (74°C)
Cold lunchmeat and deli meat	Cook until steaming

Tip 2 – Safe food preparation and handling are also important
Some of the same bacteria and parasites can also be found on fruits and vegetables, or in unpasteurized dairy products like milk, cheese, and eggs. Washing your fruits and vegetables thoroughly and eating only pasteurized dairy products are the best ways to prevent exposure. And don't forget to wash your hands, cutting boards, and utensils thoroughly after handling uncooked meat, as well as unwashed fruits and veggies to avoid contaminating other foods.

Oh, and that grilled chicken that has been sitting in the sun for three hours – forget it! Once cooked, meat and seafood should be eaten right away. Leftovers of all types (including those pasta and potato salads, and anything with mayo or salad dressings) should be refrigerated at or below 40o F (4oC) as soon as possible and then meats thoroughly reheated before they are eaten.

Tip 3 – It is good to eat fish during pregnancy, but some are better than others
Another frequent question is about eating fish during pregnancy. Many fish contain a substance called methylmercury. Some fish have higher levels of this type of mercury than other types of fish – this usually depends upon the size of the fish, how long it lives, and where it lives prior to making it to your table.

But fish and seafood are actually a good source of protein and other vitamins that are good not only for adults but also for developing babies. The key is to eat the right types of fish and seafood in the right amounts. See our fact sheet

athttps://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/methylmercury-pregnancy/pdf/ for more information. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) also has a quick guide which can be helpful to determine which are the best options for you: https://www.fda.gov/downloads/Food/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/UCM536321.pdf%20

Tip 4 – Do some research before going swimming
Some of the bacteria mentioned earlier in this blog can be found in water, like your local lake or warm coastal waters. In addition to bacteria, lakes and rivers can contain things like protozoa and worms which cause diarrhea, abdominal cramps, and fever. Besides eating contaminated food, these organisms can get into your body if you swim in infected water especially when you have an open wound, even a small scrape, if you swallow any water, or if water goes up your nose. Risks are often highest during and after a storm as this increases rain water runoff and pollution from the surrounding area.

There also can be certain types of algae in the water that may be harmful in high amounts. I recently received a call from a pregnant mom on vacation in Florida concerned about a red tide warning in her area. Red tides are caused by a high concentration of algae (an algal bloom) and happen mainly in Florida but can occur along the Gulf Coast or as far north as Delaware. Many algal blooms are not harmful, but others can cause low oxygen levels in the water harming marine animals and causing a build-up of toxins (called brevotoxins) in the water.

Pay attention to the warnings in your area because it is not a good idea to swim in areas where you know that there is an algal bloom or high bacteria counts, particularly if you have an open wound. Check out the Environmental Protection Agency's website https://www.epa.gov/beaches to find info about freshwater and saltwater beaches in your area. Also, look around the area that you plan to swim for obvious signs of pollution like a neighboring farm, trash in the water, or even dead fish floating in the water.

It is also important not to eat locally, recreationally caught shellfish during a red tide – shellfish in grocery stores and restaurants are regulated and are not caught during an algae bloom so they aren't contaminated but recreationally harvested shellfish could be. The brevetoxins which are found in red-tides are not destroyed by cooking.

Bottomline, planning is key! While often the risks associated with food-borne illnesses are bigger for you than for your baby, a few simple precautions can help you have a healthy pregnancy and still enjoy your favorite foods and summertime activities. Just remember to pick up a meat thermometer, give those veggies a good wash before you make that salad, avoid foods that have been sitting out in the sun, and know your lakes and beaches!

Lindsey Morse, MS, CGC, is a senior genetic counselor for Ferre Genetics, a program of the Ferre Institute based in Binghamton NY. Lindsey is also a teratogen information specialist with Pregnancy Risk Network, also known as MotherToBaby New York, and has served as co-director of the program since 2015. Lindsey counsels patients in all areas of genetics from prenatal to adult genetics. She also lectures on a variety of genetic issues to community organizations including high school, university, and medical students, physicians, and community health programs.

About MotherToBaby
MotherToBaby is a service of the Organization of Teratology Information Specialists (OTIS), suggested resources by many agencies including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). If you have

questions about exposures during pregnancy and breastfeeding, please call MotherToBaby toll-FREE at 866-626-6847 or try out MotherToBaby's new text information service by texting questions to (855) 999-3525. You can also visit MotherToBaby.org to browse a library of fact sheets about dozens of viruses, medications, vaccines, alcohol, diseases, or other exposures during pregnancy and breastfeeding or connect with all of our resources by downloading the new MotherToBaby free app, available on Android and iOS markets.

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By Ginger Nichols, Licensed Certified Genetic Counselor at MotherToBaby Connecticut

I was pregnant in 2004 when the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) released guidelines on limiting fish consumption in pregnancy because of methylmercury. That pregnancy was definitely the most amazing time of my life; however, it was also stressful. It was the 5th time I had been pregnant, but due to miscarriages and the death of a son who was born very prematurely, I had yet to bring a baby home from the hospital. I became hyper-vigilant about anything that might be a possible exposure of concern for a pregnancy. I freely admit that my frame of mind for that pregnancy could not be called logical. Therefore, with the new and somewhat scary information about fish and methylmercury, fish was quickly added to my list of "don't eat that." I also admit that I don't eat the recommended amount of fish anyway, so it was not that big of a leap to stop eating all fish.

It turns out that I wasn't the only 'fish out of water.' According to a FDA study of the dietary habits of over 1,000 pregnant women in the U.S., around 21% of the women said that within the past month they had eaten zero fish. For the women who said that they did eat fish, most were eating less than the recommended dietary guidelines. However, fish is healthy for you! You don't want to stop eating fish altogether, so instead of avoiding fish, let's learn the facts.

By now, you may be asking: *"What is methylmercury and why is it in fish?"* As a Genetic Counselor and MotherToBaby specialist, I often talk to women about eating fish during pregnancy, so let me explain…. Methylmercury is an organic form of mercury. Mercury occurs naturally in the environment and it is also released into the air as a by-

product of some industrial processes. When mercury gets into the soil and the water (including lakes, rivers, and the ocean), bacteria and fungi found in soil and water change mercury into methylmercury. Since methylmercury is in our water, it is found in different levels in pretty much all fish and shellfish. In general, larger fish with long life spans that eat other fish are typically going to have higher levels of methylmercury than smaller, younger fish. If you are interested, there are lists of average mercury levels in fish available online, such as this FDA web site: https://www.fda.gov/food/foodborneillnesscontaminants/metals/ucm115644.htm

Methylmercury is found in all tissues of the fish, so cleaning or cooking the fish will not reduce the levels of mercury. People who eat a lot of fish with high levels of methylmercury can also accumulate methylmercury in their bodies. Our bodies easily absorb methylmercury from our gastrointestinal (GI) tract and it takes a long time for our bodies to get rid of it.

"So why should I be concerned about eating too much seafood with high levels of methylmercury?" We know that even if you are not pregnant, methylmercury is toxic to our nervous system and organs. The effects of methylmercury poisoning have been known since the 1950s. People who became sick from methylmercury poisoning had many symptoms that included numbness in the hands and the feet, muscle weakness, tremors (shaking), and personality changes (irritable, shy, nervous). Now before you panic, be aware that these people had been exposed to fish with levels of methylmercury far higher than even the most contaminated fish in your grocery store!

We know that methylmercury can cross the placenta in pregnancy. With very high exposures, babies have been born with small head size and brain damage that can lead to seizures, developmental delay, blindness, and muscle weakness. Since methylmercury can affect the baby's developing brain, high exposure is a concern at any stage of pregnancy. For more info, visit the MotherToBaby fact sheet on methylmercury in pregnancy and breastfeeding at https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/methylmercury-pregnancy/.

By now you may feel like you just need to stay away from eating fish in pregnancy, when in fact studies are showing that women who eat fish during pregnancy have better pregnancy outcomes than women who do not eat fish. Recent studies have also looked at how nutrients in fish, including Omega-3 fatty acids, might have positive effects for baby's development and actually may help to protect against any possible harm that might occur from prenatal methylmercury exposure. And what's more, women in the U.S. generally do not depend upon fish as their only protein intake, so are unlikely to eat enough fish to cause harmful effects in a pregnancy. So, to reap the full health benefits of fish consumption for you and baby, the key is to eat a variety of fish that are low in methylmercury. This is where the FDA's updated 2017 guidelines can provide some assistance.

"What are the current FDA guidelines?" The FDA's recently revised advice is designed to encourage women who are pregnant and/or breastfeeding to consume up to 12 ounces of fish that are low in methylmercury each week, and provides guidance on which fish are the best options by breaking the fish into categories of Best Choices, Good Choices, and Choices to Avoid. The easy-to-read guide can be found here: https://www.fda.gov/downloads/Food/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/UCM536321.pdf. You'll notice that on the FDA's guide, different types (species) of tuna and tilefish are listed under different categories – so take note of which type you are buying so you know which list it is on.

Following current recommendations, if you are planning to become pregnant, currently pregnant, or currently breastfeeding:

- A typical serving of fish is 4 to 6 ounces, measured before cooking.
- Each week, you may eat up to 2-3 servings of a variety of fish from the Best Choices list; there are over 35 different types of fish on this list!
- If choosing a fish from the Good Choices list, limit yourself to just the one serving of that fish for the week.
- Avoid the following fish, as they are highest in methylmercury: shark, swordfish, mackerel, marlin, orange roughy, bigeye tuna, and tilefish from the Gulf of Mexico.
- If you are eating fish caught by family or friends, check for local fish advisories. The EPA has a search option to check for fish/shellfish advisories based on where you live: https://fishadvisoryonline.epa.gov/General.aspx. You can also check in with your state Department of Public Health. If there isn't an advisory, limit yourself to just one serving of that fish and do not eat any other fish that week.

So now that we've got you on the hook and reeled you in, what's the takeaway? With around 60 fish listed as Best and

Good Choices on the FDA's 2017 fish guidelines, 'there are plenty of fish in the sea' for pregnant and breastfeeding moms!

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