Spring Break Safety for Pregnant and Breastfeeding Women: Tips for a Fun and Safe Holiday

Spring break is often associated with young college students flocking to the beaches to take a break from their studies. However, it is now embraced by a diverse crowd, including families with pregnant and breastfeeding women. Spring break typically takes place between March and April each year, leading to masses of people traveling by planes, trains, and automobiles. Fun times are possible for everyone, and we have guidance to increase the chances that your travels and experiences will be comfortable and safe for you and your baby.

Check-In with Your Doctor

For most pregnant women, traveling by airline, train, car, or bus is generally safe until close to their due date. Regardless of your trimester, a quick check-in with your doctor is essential to ensure you are cleared to travel.

- **First Trimester**: If you are experiencing pregnancy-related nausea, prepare ahead with needed medications and a plan to stay hydrated.
- **Second Trimester**: If you are healthy, this is a great time to travel.
- **Third Trimester**: You should be fine to travel, but keep in mind that if you go into early labor, you don't want to be far from high-quality obstetrical care. Check for hospital locations at your destination.

Check for Infectious Disease Warnings

If you are traveling outside of the U.S., check for disease warnings or recommended vaccines for your destination on the CDC Travelers' Health page. Additionally, if your destination has mosquitoes, use insect repellants to reduce the risk of exposure to infectious diseases.

Sun Exposure and Heat

Prolonged sun exposure can lead to overheating and dehydration, and in severe cases, heat stroke. High fever is a potential concern for pregnant individuals in any trimester. Prevention is key:

- Keep hydrated.
- Protect against direct sun for prolonged periods (sit under an umbrella or go indoors).
- Use sunscreen.
- Drink plenty of water.
- Avoid alcohol and limit caffeine, as they can increase dehydration.

Sunscreen

Everyone, including pregnant and breastfeeding women, should use sunscreen year-round. While there is some evidence that chemical sunscreens can penetrate the body in very small amounts, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) recommends the use of effective sunscreen. For breastfeeding women,

remember that sun exposure does not provide enough vitamin D for your baby; the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends 400 IU of vitamin D daily for breastfed babies.

Dietary Concerns

One of the highlights of travel is enjoying local food. For pregnant women, the risks from food-borne illnesses remain the same whether at home or on vacation. Avoid unpasteurized milk products, undercooked meats, and fish from risky categories.

Alcohol

Alcoholic beverages may be a destination goal for many, but pregnant and breastfeeding women are urged to continue following the warnings:

- **Pregnant Women**: It is crucial to avoid alcohol, as there is no known safe amount to drink. The risks to the developing baby are significant and can be devastating. Increasingly, restaurants are creating delicious and inviting mocktails (non-alcohol) and other beverages, offering an alternative that does not single out a person from the crowd.
- **Breastfeeding Women**: Limiting alcohol is beneficial as it can decrease the amount of breastmilk produced. It is recommended to breastfeed after two hours per drink to reduce the risk of exposure to the baby and developing brain.

Following these recommendations and reminders can help prevent exposures and experiences that could later cause grief and anxiety. Prepare well and enjoy your holiday! Ideally, a well-planned spring break will lift your spirits, provide a mental health break, allow you to enjoy new or favored foods, and create new and wonderful memories.

References and Additional Information:

CDC:

https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/page/sun-exposure

https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/heat-stress/about/illnesses.html

https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/page/sun-exposure

https://www.cdc.gov/breastfeeding-special-circumstances/hcp/diet-micronutrients/vitamin-d.html

https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel

ACOG

https://www.acog.org/womens-health/faqs/travel-during-pregnancy

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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!

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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 Robert Felix, President, MotherToBaby

Gardens are blooming, kids are out of school, beaches and parks are crowded, and the sun is shining. Ahhh….Summer is here again! With more skin showing during these warm summer months, it's important to protect our skin from the sun by wearing sunscreen. But what do we know about the safety of sunscreen products during pregnancy? Should pregnant moms avoid sunscreen? What if the day is overcast and cloudy? These are questions I'm getting often these days as a teratogen information specialist at MotherToBaby. So let me share with you what I tell women who contact our service…

First, there's a misunderstanding that when the sun is not directly shining, like when it's overcast, we are protected from the harmful effects of the sun's ultraviolet rays (UV-A and UV-B). So let me shine a light on the issue (no pun intended). Because the sun's ultraviolet rays penetrate clouds, everyone – including children and pregnant women – is vulnerable to sunburns, even on cloudy days. Damage to our skin that is caused by the sun can lead to long-term issues, including premature aging as well as skin cancer.. Prevention is key. Seeking shade, wearing protective clothing and using sunscreen are all important in reducing the risk of sunburns and skin cancer.

So what about sunscreen safety during pregnancy?

Sunscreen alone is not fully protective. However, it certainly can provide added protection for the skin and reduce the risk from sunburn. In fact, the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD) recommends everyone use sunscreen. Pregnant or not, choose a sunscreen that protects against both UVA and UVB rays. Water resistant with a high sun protection factor (SPF) really helps, too; the AAD recommends using a sunscreen with a SPF of at least 30, which blocks 97% of the sun's rays.1

The ingredients in sunscreen products in the U.S. have to go through a specific approval process. They must be reviewed by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for their safety before they hit shelves. Unfortunately, there is not one preferred choice for pregnant women. However, it is reassuring that to date there is no published information suggesting that sunscreens cause an effect to the developing fetus/unborn baby. Additionally, sunscreen use can help prevent blistering sunburns, which can become easily infected and lead to other complications for a pregnant woman.

So what do our counselors at MotherToBaby recommend that pregnant women do? Before you head out the door, cover up with cool, breathable long sleeve clothing; wear a hat to protect your head and face; apply sunscreen on any areas of your skin that are exposed; and try to stay under shaded areas, when possible. Our last bit of advice? Enjoy your summer!

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international Organization of Teratology Information Specialists (OTIS). Robert is the current president of MotherToBaby and is based at UC San Diego's Center for Better Beginnings. MotherToBaby CA answers questions over the phone as well as via live chat and email through www.MotherToBabyCA.org.

MotherToBaby is a service of the international non-profit Organization of Teratology Information Specialists (OTIS), a suggested resource by many agencies, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) Office of Women's Health. If you have questions about medications, diseases, vaccines or other exposures, call MotherToBaby toll-FREE at 866-626-6847 or visit www.MotherToBaby.org to browse a library of fact sheets and to find your nearest affiliate.

References:

- American Academy of Dermatology. Suncreen FAQs. Available from, https://www.aad.org/media-resources/stats-and-facts/prevention-and-care/sunscreen-faqs Accessed July 6, 2015.

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