Asthma

This sheet is about having asthma in pregnancy and while breastfeeding. This information is based on published research studies. It should not take the place of medical care and advice from your healthcare provider.

What is asthma?

Asthma is a condition that causes inflammation (swelling and tightening) in the airways of the lungs. When an asthma attack happens, it is hard for air to pass through the lungs. This can lead to symptoms like wheezing, coughing, and trouble breathing. Asthma is often managed with medication in inhalers for fast symptom relief (when an attack happens) and/or with daily medication to help lower inflammation (to prevent attacks).

Asthma is one of the most common chronic diseases among people of reproductive age. For some people, asthma attacks might be triggered by things like breathing in cold air, cold/flu viruses, heavy exercise, chemicals, smoke, and allergies. Avoiding triggers and having a good medical plan in place can lower the number of asthma attacks you have. Asthma that is not well controlled can increase the chance of problems in pregnancy, so it is important to talk with your healthcare provider about the best way to treat your asthma.

I have asthma. What should I talk about with my healthcare team before I get pregnant?

It is important to talk to your healthcare team about plans for treating your condition before and during pregnancy, during delivery, and after delivery. If possible, talk with your healthcare team before getting pregnant. If your pregnancy is unplanned, contact your healthcare providers as soon as you find out you are pregnant.

Things to talk about with your healthcare team include:

- Ways to monitor your pregnancy and your asthma symptoms, and ways to avoid triggers.
- Any medications or vitamins you should take during pregnancy.
- Getting any necessary vaccines before and during pregnancy. Many vaccines can be given in pregnancy. For more information, please see the MotherToBaby fact sheet on vaccines at https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/vaccines-pregnancy/.
- Any other questions or concerns you have.

Can having asthma make it harder for me to get pregnant?

It is not known if having asthma can make it harder to get pregnant. Some studies have suggested that it might take longer for people with asthma to get pregnant, especially when asthma is not well controlled. Other studies have not shown that it is harder for people with asthma to get pregnant.

Will pregnancy affect my asthma?

It is hard to know how a person's asthma will act during pregnancy. About one-third of people with asthma who are pregnant will have improvement in their symptoms, about one-third will stay the same, and about one-third will get worse. It appears that the more severe asthma is at the time of conception, the more likely it is that the symptoms will get worse during pregnancy. It is important that a person's asthma is well controlled before getting pregnant or as soon as possible.

Does having asthma increase the chance of miscarriage?

Miscarriage is common and can occur in any pregnancy for many different reasons. A few studies have suggested a small increased chance of miscarriage; however, these studies did not look at other factors that can cause miscarriage. Most studies have not shown an increased chance of miscarriage in people with asthma.

Does having asthma increase the chance of birth defects?

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. We look at research studies to try to understand if an exposure, like asthma, might increase the chance of birth defects in a pregnancy.

Some studies have suggested an increased chance of birth defects in people with asthma, while others have not. In these studies, it is hard to know if the birth defects found were due to asthma, the medications needed to control asthma, or other factors. Most people who are pregnant and have asthma have babies without birth defects. If there is an increased chance of birth defects from asthma itself, it is expected to be low.

If a person who is pregnant has trouble breathing, they will take in less oxygen. This could lead to a lower amount of oxygen getting to the pregnancy, which could cause problems in organ development and other complications.

Does having asthma increase the chance of other pregnancy-related problems?

Asthma that is not well controlled during pregnancy is linked to higher rates of pregnancy complications, such as preterm delivery (birth before week 37), low birth weight (weighing less than 5 pounds, 8 ounces [2500 grams] at birth), higher rates of C-section, problems with the placenta, hemorrhage (blood loss), high blood pressure, and preeclampsia (high blood pressure and problems with organs, such as the kidneys). People with well-controlled asthma during pregnancy are not expected to have a greater chance for pregnancy-related problems than people without asthma.

Does having asthma affect future behavior or learning for the child?

It is not known if having asthma in pregnancy can increase the chance of behavior or learning issues for the child.

Can taking medication for asthma during pregnancy increase the chance of birth defects or other pregnancy-related problems?

Most asthma medications have not been shown to increase the chance of birth defects or other pregnancy-related problems. It is important that your asthma be as well controlled as possible before, during, and after pregnancy. Talk with your healthcare provider before making any changes to how you take your medication(s) and contact MotherToBaby with questions about your specific medications. For a list of MotherToBaby fact sheets related to asthma please see: https://mothertobaby.org/pregnancy-breastfeeding-exposures/asthma/.

Breastfeeding while I have asthma:

Having asthma is not expected to affect a person's ability to breastfeed.

Can I breastfeed while taking my medications for asthma?

Most asthma medications can be taken while breastfeeding. Contact MotherToBaby with questions about your specific medications. Be sure to talk to your healthcare provider about all your breastfeeding questions.

If a man has asthma, could it affect fertility or increase the chance of birth defects?

Studies have not been done to see if asthma could affect men's fertility (ability to get a partner pregnant). Asthma in males is not expected to increase the chance of birth defects. In general, exposures that fathers or sperm donors have are unlikely to increase risks to a pregnancy. For more information, please see the MotherToBaby fact sheet Paternal Exposures at https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/paternal-exposures-pregnancy/.

MotherToBaby is currently conducting a study looking at asthma and the medications used to treat asthma in pregnancy. If you would like to learn more, please call 1-877-311-8972 or visit https://mothertobaby.org/join-study/.

Please click here for references.

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