Guaifenesin

In every pregnancy, a woman starts out with a 3-5% chance of having a baby with a birth defect. This percentage is called her background risk. This fact sheet gives information concerning the increased risks for birth defects with exposure to guaifenesin beyond the 3%-5%. The information included here should not take the place of medical advice from your health care provider.

What is guaifenesin?
Guaifenesin is an oral medication called an “expectorant”, which loosens mucus in the throat and chest. It is commonly used to treat chest congestion as a result of colds and allergies. Guaifenesin is the only expectorant approved by the Food and Drug Administration and can be found in over-the-counter cough and cold medications like Mucinex and Robitussin. Often, it is combined with cough suppressants, antihistamines, and decongestants for better symptom relief. Research suggests that it is one of the more commonly used over-the-counter medications in pregnancy.

Can taking guaifenesin make it more difficult for me to become pregnant?
Probably not. Very limited data has indicated that guaifenesin may actually help improve cervical mucus factors associated with female infertility; however, more research is needed in order to confirm this. Additionally, there are anecdotal reports of guaifenesin helping to improve the quality of sperm in men. Again, much more research is necessary to investigate whether this is a true effect of guaifenesin, or is due to some other factor.

Can taking guaifenesin during my pregnancy cause birth defects?
Not likely. Several studies have reported potential associations between the use of guaifenesin and two different types of birth defects called inguinal hernias and neural tube defects (an abnormal opening in the brain or spinal canal). The evidence linking these birth defects to the medication use in mothers is quite weak, though, and flaws in the study design do not allow for firm conclusions to be made. Importantly, other studies have not confirmed a link between guaifenesin use and birth defects. When considering using any medication in pregnancy, careful consideration of the risks versus benefits must be taken into account.

Can I take guaifenesin while breastfeeding?
The use of guaifenesin while breastfeeding has not been well studied, although we do not know of any increased risks to the nursing baby. Breastfeeding mothers should discuss their need for medication with their healthcare providers prior to use of guaifenesin as with any over the counter medication.

What if the father of the baby takes guaifenesin?
A man’s use of guaifenesin has not been studied for effects on pregnancy. In general, exposures that the father has does not increase risk to a pregnancy. For more information, please see the MotherToBaby fact sheet on Paternal Exposures at http://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/paternal-exposures-pregnancy/.

Selected References: