Pregnancy and Natural Disasters

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

What is a natural disaster?

Natural disasters are events that result from natural processes of the Earth. They can greatly affect a person's health and safety. Some examples of natural disasters include heat waves, hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, and wildfires.

How can I prepare for a natural disaster?

Preparation is key for people who are pregnant because they are considered a vulnerable population during these times. The CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) and the U.S. government have helpful information to get you through a disaster:

- Natural Disaster Safety for Expecting and New Parents: https://www.samhsa.gov/resource/dbhis/disaster-safety-expecting-new-parents
- Safety Messages for Pregnant, Postpartum, and Breastfeeding People During Natural Disasters and Severe Weather: https://www.cdc.gov/reproductive-health/emergency-preparation-response/safety-messages.html?CDC_AAref_Val=https://www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/emergency/safety-messages.htm
- Information to prepare for natural disasters such as floods, hurricanes, earthquakes: https://www.ready.gov/

I am pregnant. What are some exposures that could happen during or after a natural disaster?

Vaccinations

Vaccinations are given to protect people from serious diseases. Some vaccinations that might be recommended following a natural disaster are hepatitis A, hepatitis B, and/or tetanus. If you are up to date on these vaccinations, you may not need to get them again. Keep your vaccination record in a safe place and take it with you when you see your healthcare provider, especially if you need to move to a new area. Your healthcare providers or health authorities may recommend additional vaccinations. MotherToBaby has a fact sheet on vaccines at https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/vaccines-pregnancy/.

Infections

There can be risks for infections after a natural disaster. Drinking polluted food or water, physical injury, and/or crowding in shelters can increase the chance of infection. Follow the recommendations from health authorities to lower your chances of getting an infection. If you think you already have an infection, talk to your healthcare provider right away. Be sure to follow their advice on treating your infection.

Medication

If you take medication, keep it in a safe place and continue to take it as directed. If you have a condition that needs monitoring and you cannot reach your healthcare provider, let authorities know as soon as it is safe to do so. You may need to take other medication if you have an infection or other illness. Contact MotherToBaby (https://mothertobaby.org/contact-expert/ or 866.626.6847) if you have questions about specific medication(s).

Mosquito-Borne Illness

During or after a natural disaster, there may be more mosquitoes around. Using insect repellent correctly is important to help protect against infections spread by mosquitoes, such as

- Zika: https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/zika-virus-pregnancy/

- West Nile Virus: https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/west-nile-virus-infection-pregnancy/
- Malaria: https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/malaria/
- Dengue: https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/dengue/

Insect Repellent

Insect repellent is recommended for people who are pregnant or breastfeeding. Use as directed on the label**.** The most common active ingredient in insect repellent is DEET. Please see our fact sheets for more information:

- DEET: https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/deet-nn-ethyl-m-toluamide-pregnancy/
- General insect repellents: https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/insect-repellents/.

Other ways to lower your chance of being bitten by a mosquito include wearing long pants, long sleeved shirts, a hat, and shoes.

Cleaning Products

When used as directed on the label, common household cleaning products are not expected to increase the risks to your pregnancy. To help reduce skin exposure, wear the type of gloves recommended on the product label. Wash your hands well after using cleaning products.

Chemicals/Pollutants

If you think that you may have been exposed to harmful chemicals or pollutants and you have symptoms or concerns, contact your healthcare provider and Poison Control as soon as possible. Poison Control can be reached online at https://www.poison.org/ or by calling 1-800-222-1222.

Lead

If you have been exposed to lead, talk to your healthcare provider. MotherToBaby has a fact sheet on lead at https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/lead-pregnancy/

Water

The water supply may not be safe to use after a natural disaster. Local authorities will tell you if your water supply is safe to drink, to use for cooking, or to use for bathing. It may be recommended to drink bottled water. If bottled water is not available, use boiled water if the local public health department says this is okay. Bringing water to a rolling boil for 1 minute will kill most disease-causing organisms, but it will not remove chemicals. Do not use water that has been treated with iodine unless you do not have bottled water and cannot boil your water. If you do not have clean water for washing hands, use alcohol-based hand sanitizers.

Stress

Stress is the way your body reacts to something that is unusual, dangerous, unknown, or disturbing. Feeling stress is very common during natural disasters. When under stress, your body goes through physical and chemical changes. Some of the symptoms of stress can include chest pain, fast heart rate, breathing problems, headaches, vision problems, confusion, anxiety, grief, denial, fear, or worry. Please see our fact sheet on stress at https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/stress-pregnancy/. Also, the Disaster Distress Helpline, (phone: 1-800-985-5990), is a 24/7, 365-day-a-year, national hotline dedicated to providing immediate crisis counseling for people who are experiencing emotional distress related to any natural or human-caused disaster.

Mold

Molds are fungi that can be found both indoors and outdoors. They grow best in warm, damp, and humid places. Some molds can produce substances called toxins. In some people, exposure to mold toxins can cause symptoms such as stuffy nose, eye irritation, rashes, wheezing, fever, or shortness of breath. For more information on mold see our fact sheet at https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/mold-pregnancy/.

Breastfeeding after a natural disaster:

If possible, keep breastfeeding even after a natural disaster. Breast milk can help protect babies from infections. For more information, see our sheet Breastfeeding Following a Natural Disaster at https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/breastfeeding-natural-disaster/. If you have a question about a specific medication, infection, or other exposure while breastfeeding, contact a MotherToBaby specialist. Be sure to talk to your healthcare provider about all of your breastfeeding questions.

Please click here for references.

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

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