Pregnancy and Natural Disasters

This sheet is about exposure to natural disasters in pregnancy and while breastfeeding. This information should not take the place of medical care and advice from your healthcare providers.

What is a natural disaster?

Natural disasters are events that result from natural processes of the Earth. They can be harmful to human health and safety. Some examples of natural disasters include hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, and wildfires.

How can I prepare for a natural disaster?


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. Vaccinations that you might be given following a natural disaster include hepatitis A, hepatitis B, and/or tetanus. However, if you are up to date on these vaccines you may not need to get them again. Keep your vaccination record in a safe place. Take your vaccination record 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 other 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 all pose a risk for 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 requires monitoring, and you cannot reach your healthcare provider, let the authorities know as soon as it is safe to do so. You may need to take additional 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 your specific medication(s).

Mosquito-Borne Illness

During or after a natural disaster, there may be more mosquitos around. Using insect repellent is an important way to help protect against infections spread by mosquitos. Some infections that can be spread by mosquitos include:

- 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/

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

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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 you have general 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. When under stress, your body makes physical and chemical changes. Some of the symptoms of stress can include chest pain, rapid 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/.

**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. Exposure to mold toxins can cause health symptoms in some people. Symptoms might be allergic reactions such as stuffy nose, eye irritation, rashes, and wheezing, and possibly fever or shortness of breath. Not everyone will have these symptoms. 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. If you need a vaccination, it's likely you can receive it and keep breastfeeding. The only vaccines not recommended for people who are breastfeeding are Yellow Fever and Smallpox, which are both live virus vaccines. In most cases, if you have an infection, you can continue to breastfeed. The only exceptions for breastfeeding are brucellosis and HIV infection. If you have a question about a specific medication, infection or other exposure while breastfeeding, contact a MotherToBaby specialist.