Phenylephrine

This sheet is about exposure to phenylephrine in pregnancy and while breastfeeding. This information is based on available published literature. It should not take the place of medical care and advice from your healthcare provider.

What is phenylephrine?

Phenylephrine is a decongestant. Decongestants have been used to treat nasal congestion ("stuffy nose") caused by colds or allergies. Phenylephrine can be found in different products, including Sudafed PE®. Phenylephrine has also been used to treat temporary low blood pressure caused by anesthesia used during surgeries.

Sometimes when women find out they are pregnant, they think about changing how they take their medication, or stopping their medication altogether. However, it is important to talk with your healthcare providers before making any changes to how you take your medication. Your healthcare providers can talk with you about the benefits of treating your condition and the risks of untreated illness during pregnancy.

Some decongestants or other over-the-counter medications might have multiple active ingredients. Be sure to look at the ingredients on your medications.

I take phenylephrine. Can it make it harder for me to get pregnant?

It is not known if phenylephrine can make it harder to get pregnant.

Does taking phenylephrine increase the chance of miscarriage?

Miscarriage is common and can occur in any pregnancy for many different reasons. Studies have not been done to see if phenylephrine can increase the chance of miscarriage.

Does taking phenylephrine 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. Studies involving more than 1,500 women who were pregnant and took phenylephrine in the first trimester did not show an increased chance of birth defects. In another study looking at 1,249 women who took phenylephrine in the first trimester, a slightly higher chance for minor differences of the eyes or ears were reported (small changes that are not birth defects). Studies on other medications that work in the same way (make blood vessels smaller) have raised questions about a small increased chance of birth defects.

Does taking phenylephrine in pregnancy increase the chance of other pregnancy-related problems?

It is not known if phenylephrine might increase the chance of other pregnancy-related problems, such as preterm delivery (birth before week 37) or low birth weight (weighing less than 5 pounds, 8 ounces [2500 grams] at birth).

Phenylephrine can make blood vessels smaller (constrict). There are theoretical (not proven) concerns that using this medication could reduce blood flow through the placenta (organ that grows during pregnancy to supply the developing baby with food and oxygen).

Taking phenylephrine could raise your blood pressure. If you have high blood pressure, be sure to talk to your healthcare provider about medications that would be best for you.

Does taking phenylephrine in pregnancy affect future behavior or learning for the child?

Studies have not been done to see if phenylephrine can increase the chance of behavior or learning issues for the child.

Breastfeeding while taking phenylephrine:

Studies have not been done to see if phenylephrine gets into breast milk. Studies in animals have shown that phenylephrine might reduce milk supply. Because there is little information about the use of oral phenylephrine while breastfeeding, use of nasal sprays or other medication might be preferred. Be sure to talk to your healthcare provider

about all your breastfeeding questions.

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

Studies have not been done to see if phenylephrine could affect a man's fertility (ability to get a woman pregnant) or increase the chance of birth defects. In general, exposures that men 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/.

Please click here for references.

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