

Physical Trauma

This sheet is about exposure to physical trauma 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 trauma?

Trauma can include damage to the body and/or the mind. Trauma that is caused by sudden harm to the body can include being in a car crash, falling, being burned, or experiencing physical violence. This sheet will focus on physical trauma. More information on stress can be found in our fact sheet at <https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/stress-pregnancy/>.

It is important that you are physically and emotionally safe before, during, and after pregnancy. Trauma can cause long-term physical and mental health issues. If you have or are currently experiencing physical trauma talk with your healthcare provider or other trusted source, such as the National Domestic Violence hotline at 1-800-799-7233 (SAFE) or <https://www.thehotline.org/>.

Pregnancy outcomes after physical trauma can vary based on many factors, including the type and severity of the trauma, when it happened during pregnancy, and where on the body the trauma occurred. For questions about your specific situation, contact a MotherToBaby specialist.

I have experienced physical trauma. Can it make it harder for me to get pregnant?

Some types of physical trauma might make it harder to get pregnant. For example, physical trauma that damages the uterus might affect fertility (ability to get pregnant).

One study found women with traumatic brain injury were more likely to experience changes to their menstrual cycle, which could affect fertility.

Does experiencing physical trauma increase the chance of miscarriage?

Miscarriage is common and can occur in any pregnancy for many different reasons. Some types of trauma, such as trauma that causes damage to the placenta or uterus, can increase the chance of miscarriage. (The uterus is where the pregnancy is located. The placenta is the organ that grows inside the uterus that provides oxygen and nutrients to the pregnancy).

Does experiencing physical trauma increase the chance of birth defects?

Every pregnancy starts with a 3-5% chance of having a birth defect. This is called the background risk. It is not known if physical trauma increases the chance of birth defects above the background risk. There are reports of babies born with and without birth defects following physical trauma. One study of 62 women who were treated for car accidents during the first 3 months of pregnancy did not find an increased chance of birth defects.

Does experiencing physical trauma in pregnancy increase the chance of other pregnancy-related problems?

Women who have experienced physical trauma during pregnancy might have an increased chance for other pregnancy-related problems, such as preterm delivery (birth before week 37) and infants with low birth weight (weighing less than 5 pounds, 8 ounces [2500 grams] at birth). Certain physical trauma can also increase the chance of placental abruption (when the placenta pulls away from the uterus). The placenta can separate from the uterus when there is severe trauma to the stomach area. If this happens, this can cause pregnancy loss or stillbirth.

Does experiencing physical trauma in pregnancy affect future behavior or learning for the child?

Whether there are effects on future behavior or learning might be related to the severity of the trauma and whether there was any injury to the developing brain. One study looking at 16 women who were pregnant and exposed to mostly minor injuries from things like a car accident or fall after 20 weeks of pregnancy did not find unusual development at the time of birth and at 1 year of age.

What should I do if I experience physical trauma during pregnancy?

Call 911 or go to an emergency room for treatment of serious bodily injuries. Healthcare providers can treat injuries and check the progress of the pregnancy. Continue to follow up for monitoring with your healthcare provider. If you or someone you know is experiencing any type of violence, please call the National Domestic Violence Hotline 1-800-799-7233 (SAFE).

Breastfeeding after physical trauma:

It is important to weigh the benefits and risks of breastfeeding following a recent or past physically traumatic experience. Be sure to talk to your healthcare provider about all your breastfeeding questions.

If a man experiences trauma, can it affect fertility or increase the chance of birth defects?

Trauma that harms the scrotum or testicles (the body parts that help to make sperm) might affect a man's fertility (ability to get a woman pregnant). In general, exposures that men have had are unlikely to increase the risks to a pregnancy. For more information, please see the MotherToBaby fact sheet on Paternal Exposures at <https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/paternal-exposures-pregnancy/>.

Please click [here](#) to view references.

Questions? Call 866.626.6847 | Text 855.999.3525 | Email or Chat at [MotherToBaby.org](https://mothertobaby.org).

Disclaimer: MotherToBaby Fact Sheets are meant for general information purposes and should not replace the advice of your health care provider. MotherToBaby is a service of the non-profit Organization of Teratology Information Specialists (OTIS). Copyright by OTIS, February 1, 2024.