Physical Trauma

This sheet is about having physical trauma in a pregnancy or while breastfeeding. This information is based on published research studies. 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 sources, 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 of injury, how serious the injury was, when it happened during pregnancy, and where on the body the trauma occurred.

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 (the organ that would hold a pregnancy) might affect fertility (the ability to get pregnant).

One study found that women with traumatic brain injury were more likely to experience changes to their menstrual cycle (commonly called a “period”). This might 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 traumas, such as trauma that causes damage to the placenta (the organ that grows in the uterus during pregnancy) or uterus, might increase the chance of miscarriage.

Does experiencing physical trauma 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. We look at research studies to try to understand if an exposure, like trauma, might increase the chance of birth defects in a pregnancy.

It is not known if physical trauma increases the chance of birth defects. There are reports of babies born with and without birth defects following physical trauma. One study of 62 pregnant 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). If this happens, this might 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 how serious the injury was 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 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 injuries. Let your healthcare provider know about any trauma. 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:

Some studies have suggested that women who experience physical violence have lower rates of breastfeeding and breastfeed for a shorter amount of time. It can be helpful for a woman who is breastfeeding to have support while nursing. This can include a breastfeeding support group, a lactation specialist, and/or friends or family members who can give help and support. If you are having trouble breastfeeding and would like to continue breastfeeding, please contact your healthcare provider or your baby's pediatrician. Be sure to talk to your healthcare provider about all your breastfeeding questions.

If a man experiences physical 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 male fertility (ability to make healthy sperm). In general, exposures that men have 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 for references.

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