Stress

This sheet talks about exposure to stress in a pregnancy and while breastfeeding. This information should not take the place of medical care and advice from your healthcare provider.

What is stress?

Stress is the way your body reacts to something that is unusual, dangerous, unknown or disturbing. It can come from any event or thought that makes you feel frustrated, angry, or nervous. When under stress, your body makes physical and chemical changes.

Almost anything can cause stress. Everyone responds to stressful situations in their own way. An extremely stressful situation for one person may not be at all stressful to another. Because we all have different reactions to stress, it is difficult to study how stress may affect pregnancy or breastfeeding.

What are some of the symptoms of stress?

- Physical: Chest pain, rapid heart rate, breathing problems, headaches, vision problems, teeth grinding, dizziness, fatigue, stomach problems, muscle aches.
- Mental: Confusion, memory loss, nightmares, finding it hard to focus, having a hard time making decisions, changes in sleeping patterns.
- Emotional: Feelings of anxiety, guilt, grief, denial, fear, irritability, worry, frustration, or loneliness. Periods of anger or crying.
- Social: Staying away from friends and family, eating too much or too little, drinking too much alcohol, using drugs.

Should I be concerned about stress?

In small amounts, stress can be positive and healthy. However, being under a lot of stress over time can affect your health and well-being. Stress can increase the chance for developing high blood pressure or depression. Stress may also cause existing medical problems to worsen. For example, if someone has diabetes and is under stress, it may be difficult to keep blood sugar levels under control. If stress is causing you to have additional medical problems, discuss these problems with your healthcare provider.

Can stress make it harder for me to become pregnant?

Some studies have suggested that stress may make it harder to get pregnant. If you are struggling with getting pregnant and this is causing you stress, discuss this with your healthcare provider.

I just found out that I am pregnant. What are some ways to reduce my stress level?

- Don’t be afraid to ask for help.
- Talk about your feelings with people you trust, including friends, family, and/or healthcare professionals.
- Follow good health habits: avoid smoking, drinking alcohol or taking recreational drugs; eat a healthy diet; drink plenty of water; rest; take your prescribed medication as directed; follow an exercise plan approved by your healthcare provider.
- Try to have fun and do things that you enjoy.

Are conditions caused by stress a problem during pregnancy?

Ongoing stress can increase the chance of developing mental and physical illness, such as depression, high blood pressure, and obesity. Some conditions caused by stress can negatively affect your health. Many such conditions can be successfully treated during pregnancy.
Can stress increase the chance for miscarriage?

Miscarriage can occur in any pregnancy. There are some studies that suggest a lot of stress could increase the chance for miscarriage. However, it is hard to know if the chance for miscarriage is from stress alone or if it might be due to other things that the person may be doing to relieve the stress such as poor eating habits, smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol or misusing drugs. It is unknown if stress, on its own, increases the chance for miscarriage.

Does stress in the first trimester increase the chance of birth defects?

Every pregnancy starts out with a 3-5% chance of having a baby with a birth defect. This is called the background risk. It is difficult to measure stress and to study its effects on pregnancy. However, it is unlikely that stress alone will increase the chance of birth defects.

Can stress in the second or third trimester cause other pregnancy complications?

There are some studies that suggest stress can lead to preterm delivery (birth before 37 weeks) or low birth weight. Because everyone responds to stressful situations in their own way, it is not known if stress, on its own, increases the chance for these pregnancy complications.

Will the medications used to treat potential health effects of stress, like high blood pressure, ulcers, or depression, hurt my baby?

There are medications that can be used to treat stress that can be used during pregnancy. In fact, it may be more harmful to the pregnancy if some conditions are not treated. Contact MotherToBaby to talk with a specialist about specific medication(s) during pregnancy and breastfeeding.

Can stress in pregnancy cause long-term problems in behavior or learning for the baby?

There have been a limited number of studies about long-term problems for a baby after an exposure to stress during pregnancy. It is not known at this time if stress in pregnancy cause long-term problems in behavior or learning issues.

Can stress affect breastfeeding?

Stress may cause problems with breastfeeding. For some people breastfeeding itself can feel overwhelming and cause stress. It can be helpful to have support while nursing, such as a breastfeeding support group, friends or family members who will help you.

Can I breastfeed my baby if I’m taking medications used to treat things like high blood pressure or depression?

There are medications that can be used to treat health conditions that can be used during breastfeeding. For more information on specific medication(s) during breastfeeding contact MotherToBaby. Be sure to talk to your health care provider about all of your breastfeeding questions.

If a man is stressed, could it affect his fertility (ability to get partner pregnant) or increase the chance of birth defects?

Some studies have suggested that men under stress may have a harder time getting their partners pregnant. In general, exposures that fathers and sperm she have are unlikely to increase risks to a pregnancy. For more information, please see the MotherToBaby fact sheet Paternal Exposures at https://mothertobaby.org/factsheets/paternal-exposures-pregnancy/pdf/.

Where can I get help?

It is important to get help from a professional before your stress level becomes out of control. Healthcare providers, mental health professionals or counselors, can help you find the resources and assistance needed to cope with stress.

Please click here for references.