



MotherToBaby

Medications & More During Pregnancy & Breastfeeding  
Ask The Experts

Fact Sheet

by the **Organization of Teratology Information Specialists (OTIS)**

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## Stress

In every pregnancy, a woman starts out with a 3-5% chance of having a baby with a birth defect. This is called her background risk. This sheet talks about whether exposure to stress may increase the risk for birth defects over that background risk. This information should not take the place of medical care and advice from your health care provider.

### ***What is 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.

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.

### ***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, abusing drugs.

### ***Why should I be concerned about stress?***

Some stress can be healthy. However, being under a lot of stress over time can affect your health and well-being. Stress can increase the chance for developing conditions such as 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, please discuss these with your doctor.

### ***Are conditions caused by stress a problem during pregnancy?***

Having high blood pressure or depression could affect your health. Sometimes medicine is needed to keep the mother healthy. When the mother is healthy it improves the chances of having a healthy pregnancy.

### ***Can stress cause my baby to have a birth defect?***

We don't know. It is difficult to measure stress and to study its effects on pregnancy. However, it is unlikely that stress alone is able to greatly increase the chance of birth defects.

### ***I read that stress might cause other pregnancy problems. What are they?***

There are some studies that suggest extreme stress could increase the chance for miscarriage, preterm delivery (baby being born too early), or low birth weight. Some studies have also suggested that stress may make it more difficult to get pregnant. However, these complications may 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 abusing drugs. For now, it is unknown if stress, on its own, increases the chance for pregnancy complications.

***Will the medicines used to treat potential health effects of stress, like high blood pressure, ulcers, or depression, hurt***

### ***my baby?***

Most medicines are not associated with an increased chance for birth defects. In fact, it may be more harmful to the pregnancy if some conditions are not treated. Contact MotherToBaby to talk with a counselor about your specific medication(s) and what is known about using them during pregnancy or breastfeeding.

### ***Can being stressed affect breastfeeding?***

Currently, there are no studies that look at the relationship between stress and breastfeeding. For some people with high levels of stress, breastfeeding can feel overwhelming. Find supportive friends or family members who will help you through the process.

### ***Can I breastfeed my baby if I'm taking medicines used to treat things like high blood pressure, ulcers, or depression?***

Most medicines get into the breast milk at different levels. Many medications are okay to use during breastfeeding. For more information on specific medicines during breastfeeding contact MotherToBaby. Be sure to talk to your health care provider about all of your breastfeeding questions.

### ***What if the father of the baby is under stress or takes medicine for anxiety or high blood pressure?***

Some studies have suggested that men under stress may have a harder time getting their partner pregnant. In general, exposures that fathers 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/pdf/>.

### ***What are ways to reduce stress?***

- Talk about your feelings with friends, family, your boss, and/or healthcare professionals.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help.
- Follow good health habits: avoid smoking, drinking alcohol or taking illegal drugs; eat a healthy diet; drink plenty of water; get the rest you need; if you have been prescribed medicine, take it as directed; and follow an exercise plan approved by your health care provider.
- Try to have fun. Find something you enjoy and do it. Feeling positive can be helpful.

### ***Where can I get help?***

It is important to get help from a professional before the situation is out of control. Contact your obstetrician, pediatrician, healthcare providers, mental health professionals, counselors, or clergy. These individuals can help you find the resources and assistance needed to cope with stress.

### **References Available By Request**

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