

Ep. 94 - How Birth Defect Surveillance Protects Moms & Babies: From Zika to Opioid Exposure

How do public health experts detect emerging risks to pregnancies before they become widespread crises? In this episode of The MotherToBaby Podcast, host Chris Stallman, genetic counselor, mom of four, and teratogen information specialist, sits down with Dr. Amanda Elmore, Assistant Professor of Maternal & Child Health at the University of South Florida, to explore the powerful role of birth defect surveillance.

Dr. Elmore shares how her career in public health began during the Zika virus epidemic—reviewing medical records of exposed infants to help the CDC understand the real-world impact of in-utero exposure. She explains how surveillance systems track structural and functional birth anomalies, serve as early warning systems for new and emerging exposures, and shape everything from clinical care and referral services to national public health policy.

The conversation also dives into:

- How surveillance led to rapid public health responses during the Zika crisis
- What neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS) reveals about opioid exposure during pregnancy
- The push for real-time data using electronic medical records and health information exchanges
- How machine learning and natural language processing may transform how cases are identified
- Why a life-course perspective matters for children born with birth defects
- How surveillance data supports funding, prevention efforts, and long-term family services

Dr. Elmore also shares her vision for the future: a more standardized, timely, and integrated national system that can better support prevention, research, and lifelong care for affected children and families.

This episode offers a behind-the-scenes look at how data quietly powers some of the most important protections for moms and babies.

- Have questions about exposures during pregnancy or breastfeeding?
You can contact MotherToBaby for free, confidential, evidence-based information:
- Call: 866-626-6847
- Text: 855-999-3525
- Visit: <https://mothertobaby.org/>

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The weeks after delivery (often called the fourth trimester) can raise just as many questions as pregnancy itself. From pain management and supplements to beauty treatments and mental health medications, many parents are unsure how different exposures may affect breastfeeding.

In this episode of The MotherToBaby Podcast, host Chris Stallman, MS, CGC, is joined by Kirstie Perrotta, MPH, and Angela Messer, MS, Teratogen Information Specialists from MotherToBaby California, to discuss some of the most common postpartum questions they receive from parents and healthcare providers.

Together, they explain how exposure information is evaluated during breastfeeding and how factors like dose, timing, and route of exposure influence what may reach breast milk.

In This Episode, You'll Learn:

- What the fourth trimester is and why exposure questions continue after delivery
- Common postpartum concerns, including pain medications, stool softeners, and laxatives
- How prescription pain medications, including opioids, are evaluated during breastfeeding
- Why route of exposure matters when considering topical products
- What to know about hair dye, Botox, manicures, facials, and salon treatments
- Why supplements, herbal products, and proprietary blends raise additional questions
- Which over-the-counter medications are often discussed in the breastfeeding period
- How medication guidance can differ between pregnancy and lactation
- Why addressing postpartum mental health conditions is essential
- Common breastfeeding myths and misconceptions
- Practical tips to reduce direct infant contact with topical products

Key Takeaways:

- Many medications have data available for use during breastfeeding
- Topical products are typically evaluated based on how they are applied and absorbed
- High-dose supplements and proprietary blends often lack breastfeeding data
- Postpartum pain, mental health, and chronic conditions deserve appropriate treatment
- Feeding decisions are personal, and there is no single approach that works for everyone

Resources Mentioned:

- **MotherToBaby.org** – evidence-based fact sheets, Baby Blogs, podcasts, and educational resources
- Over **300 fact sheets** in English and Spanish on medications, exposures, and health conditions
- One-on-one support via **phone, chat, text, or email**
- **MotherToBaby Pregnancy Studies** – helping expand knowledge about medications, conditions, and exposures in pregnancy and lactation

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Exposure

Expecting a baby often comes with a long list of questions—and a lot of conflicting information. Can you really drink coffee? What about sushi or soft cheese? Which cold medications are ok in pregnancy? And how should you handle everyday exposures like cleaning products?

In this episode of The MotherToBaby Podcast, host Chris Stallman, Certified Genetic Counselor and mom of four, is joined by returning guests Angela Messer and Kirstie Perrotta, both experienced teratogen information specialists (and moms themselves). Together, they sort through some of the most common pregnancy “do’s and don’ts,” offering clarity with evidence-based insights.

In this episode you’ll learn:

- ☞ How much caffeine experts suggest during pregnancy
- ☐ The truth about soft cheeses and why pasteurization matters
- ☐ Sushi and mercury exposure—what to consider and what to limit
- ☐ Tips for managing allergies and colds while pregnant or breastfeeding
- ☐ Guidance on handling cleaning products and reducing exposures
- ☐ Why supplements and “natural” remedies aren’t always the best option
- ☐ The importance of folic acid in prenatal vitamins
- ☐ Real stories from Angela, Kirstie, and Chris about what worried them during their own pregnancies

Whether you’re pregnant, breastfeeding, or supporting someone who is, this conversation offers reassurance, practical advice, and a reminder: you’re doing your best, and you’re not alone.

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With so much information online, it can feel overwhelming to know what's trustworthy—especially when you're pregnant, breastfeeding, or planning a family. In this episode of The MotherToBaby Podcast, host Chris Stallman, CGC, sits down with Bridget Maloney, MS, CGC of the University of Arizona and MotherToBaby Arizona to unpack how to separate credible health information from clickbait headlines.

In this episode, they discuss:

- How to tell if a website or social media post is reliable
- Common “red flags” and buzzwords to look out for
- Why even well-intentioned online advice can sometimes mislead
- How to double-check what you see online with healthcare providers
- Where to turn for evidence-based resources you can understand

-Whether you're scrolling through social media or doing a late-night search about a medication or food, this episode will help you navigate today's flood of information with confidence and calm.

Learn more or connect with our experts at [MotherToBaby.org](https://www.MotherToBaby.org)

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Concerned about medication use during pregnancy? You're not alone.

In this episode of The MotherToBaby Podcast, host Chris Stallman, MS, CGC (genetic counselor, mom of four, teratogen information specialist) sits down with Dr. Judy C. Morrow of Harvard Medical School to break down how FDA REMS (Risk Evaluation and Mitigation Strategy) programs help reduce the risk of birth defects and protect pregnant patients.

Together, they discuss:

- ✓ What REMS programs are and why they exist
- ✓ How REMS programs support safe medication use
- ✓ The role of manufacturers, prescribers, and pharmacists
- ✓ Common medications with REMS programs (including isotretinoin/Accutane)
- ✓ Pregnancy testing requirements & pharmacy restrictions
- ✓ Why some drugs don't have REMS (even if risks exist)

- ✓ What patients should ask if they're prescribed a REMS-covered medication

Dr. Morrow shares how researchers use real-world data to identify medication-related adverse events in pregnancy, how REMS programs try to prevent exposed pregnancies, and why communication between patients, providers, and pharmacists is essential.

If you're pregnant, planning a pregnancy, breastfeeding, or support patients in these settings, this episode offers clear, practical insights to help guide informed decision-making.

□ Key topics: pregnancy, REMS, FDA, teratogens, isotretinoin, Accutane, birth defects, pharmacy programs, medication safety, pregnancy data, registries

□ Listen now to learn how REMS programs help protect pregnant women and their babies.

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