



For more information about the Organization of Teratology Information Specialists or to find a service in your area, call (866) 626-6847 or visit us online at: www.OTISpregnancy.org.

Stress and Pregnancy

This sheet talks about the risks that stress can have during pregnancy. With each pregnancy, all women have a 3% to 5% chance of having a baby with a birth defect. 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 out of the ordinary, dangerous, unknown or disturbing. Almost anything can cause stress and each individual responds to stressful situations in their own way. When under stress, your body makes physical and chemical changes to try to protect it.

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, inability to focus, make decisions or sleep

Emotional: Feelings of anxiety, guilt, grief, denial, fear, irritability, worry, frustration, loneliness. Episodes of anger or crying.

Social: Isolating yourself from others, eating too much or too little, consuming excessive alcohol, abuse of drugs

Why should I be concerned about stress?

While some stress can be healthy, being under excessive stress over time can be of concern for your health and well being. Stress can increase the risk for developing conditions such as high blood pressure or depression. Stress can contribute to making existing medical problems worse. For example, if someone has diabetes and is under stress, it may be difficult to keep blood sugar levels under control.

Are these conditions a problem during pregnancy?

Having high blood pressure or depression may have an effect on your health. Sometimes medicine is needed to keep mom healthy. When the mother is healthy it improves the chances of having a healthy baby.

Can stress from a natural disaster cause my baby to have a birth defect?

No. As stressful as living through a natural disaster is, it is unlikely that this stress would cause birth defects.

I read that stress might cause other pregnancy problems like miscarriage.

There are some studies that associate severe stress with an increased risk for

miscarriage, preterm delivery, and low birth weight. However, these adverse outcomes may be due to other things that the person may be doing to relieve the stress such as smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol and abusing drugs. For now, it is unknown if stress itself increases the risk for adverse pregnancy outcomes.

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 risk for birth defects. In fact, it may be more harmful to the pregnancy if some conditions are not treated. By calling toll free 1-866-626-6847, you can talk to a counselor about specific medication and the possible risks to a pregnancy.

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 but at different levels and many medicines are safe to use during breastfeeding. For more information on the use specific medicines during breastfeeding call 1-866-626-6847.

What are ways to reduce stress from a natural disaster?

- Talk about your feelings with friends, family and professionals and don't be afraid to ask for help.
- Follow good health habits. Don't smoke, drink alcohol or take illegal drugs. Be sure that you maintain a healthy diet and get the rest you need. If you have been prescribed medicine, make sure you take it as directed.
- Limit watching or reading about the disaster. Reliving the event over and over again can increase the anxiety and cause more stress.
- Try to have fun. Find something you enjoy and do it. Feeling positive can be helpful.

Where can I get help?

It is very important to get help from a professional before the situation is out of control. Contact your obstetrician, pediatrician, family doctor, clinic, mental health professionals, counselors, or clergy. These individuals can help you find the resources and assistance needed to deal with stress and its effects.

March 2006.
Copyright by OTIS.
Reproduced by permission.



The Development of this fact sheet was supported by funds from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

References:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Communicating in a Crisis: Risk Communication Guideline for Public Officials. [cited 2006 March 13]. Available from URL: <http://riskcommunication.samhsa.gov/index.htm>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Coping with a Traumatic Event: Information for the Public. [cited 2006 March 13]. Available from URL: <http://www.bt.cdc.gov/masstrauma/copingpub.asp>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Helping Patients Cope with a Traumatic Event. [cited 2006 March 13]. Available from URL: <http://www.bt.cdc.gov/masstrauma/copingpro.asp>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Traumatic Incident Stress: Information for Emergency Response Workers. [cited 2006 March 13]. Available from URL: <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/mining/pubs/pdfs/tisif.pdf>

Hansen D, et al. 2000. Serious life events and congenital malformations: A national study with complete follow-up. *Lancet* 356:875-80.

McAnarney ER and Stevens-Simon C. 1990. Maternal psychological stress/depression and low birth weight. Is there a relationship? *Am J Dis Child* 144:789-792.

Nelson DB et al. 2003. Does stress influence early pregnancy loss? *Ann Epidemiol* 13(4):223-9.

Newton RW and Hunt LP. 1984. Psychological stress in pregnancy and its relations to low birth weight. *Br Med J* 288:1191-1194.

*If you have questions about the information on this fact sheet or other exposures during pregnancy, call **OTIS at 1-866-626-6847.***