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A Good Beginning: Limiting Risks for Your Unborn Baby

Will I have a normal and healthy baby? Will the baby be born with some kind of physical or mental problem? Will it be a difficult birth? These are a few questions you may have during your pregnancy. It is not possible to predict the future, but you can make smart choices to give your baby the best chance at arriving healthy and happy.

Certain substances or dietary habits could classify you as high risk. Some risk factors are alcoholism, drug addiction, smoking, poor dietary habits, and too much caffeine in the diet.

Alcohol

Alcohol is a central nervous system depressant that affects many organs in your body. Many of us do not even think of alcohol as a drug. When alcohol is used excessively during pregnancy, it can affect the delicate body of your unborn baby.

Research studies have shown that alcohol passes through the placenta to the baby so that when you have a drink, the baby has one equal in strength. Because of the size and developing system of the fetus, this can be harder on the baby than on you. Researchers have reported that babies born to mothers who drink excessively develop irreversible brain damage and mental retardation. Babies with “fetal alcohol syndrome” are smaller and lighter in weight than normal babies. They also have severe

facial malformations, heart defects, and are poorly coordinated. At present, no one knows just how much alcohol is too much.

Bottom line: based on these research findings and until all facts are known, exercise caution in using alcohol during pregnancy.

Drugs

If you are planning a pregnancy or as soon as you suspect you are pregnant, consult your physician about drugs that are safe to use during the pregnancy. Previous prescriptions may have to be discontinued or modified to prevent birth defects.

Since most drugs pass through the placenta to your baby, take only those prescribed by your doctor. Avoid over-the-counter medicines such as laxatives, sleeping pills, tranquilizers, reducing pills, pain relievers, aspirin, and baking soda. Check with your physician before taking any drug or medication.

Bottom line: the best advice is—don't take a chance.

Smoking

When a pregnant woman smokes, the nicotine and carbon monoxide from cigarettes can restrict the blood supply to the growing fetus. This restriction in turn limits the transport of nutrients and removal of body waste. Heavy smoking suppresses

the appetite, so pregnant women who smoke do not gain the weight recommended during pregnancy. Smoking increases your chances of having a baby with low birth weight. Low birth weight babies are those who weigh less than 5.5 pounds at birth. Low birth weight is considered an unfavorable outcome of pregnancy because of the documented risks associated with small-for-date babies.

Bottom line: quit or cut down on smoking during pregnancy.

Fad Approaches to Food

Fad diets are not nutritionally sound for the pregnant woman. Some examples are the low carbohydrate diet, high protein diet, starvation diet, and liquid protein diet. If you are obese at the time of conception, don't attempt to lose weight during the pregnancy. Pregnancy is also not the time to try new exotic diets. Fad diets often produce harmful changes in the body including kidney disorders and gout. When your total kilocalorie intake is severely reduced, your baby may be smaller and lighter in weight than normal babies. Dieting during pregnancy, even for short periods of time, is very dangerous.

If you are a vegetarian, you may need additional help in planning a balanced intake of protein. Be sure to include milk, other dairy products, and eggs in your diet. You may also need a vitamin B12 supplement because this vitamin is only found in foods from animal sources.

Bottom line: discuss your diet with your doctor or dietitian.

Nutrient Supplements

Your doctor may prescribe nutrient supplements during your pregnancy. She may prescribe an iron and folic acid supplement, routinely recommended for pregnant women. Your doctor may also prescribe additional calcium or omega-3 fatty acids if she considers food sources of calcium or essential fats are lacking in your diet. However, taking supplements does not guarantee you are still

receiving all the nutrients you need. Foods are the best sources of nutrition. Foods from MyPyramid food groups contain many vitamins and minerals essential for the baby's growth and development. It is important to eat a variety of foods from each of these groups throughout your pregnancy.

Bottom line: don't depend on vitamin and mineral supplements to provide all the essentials of an adequate diet.

Caffeine

Too much caffeine consumption, that is 300 milligrams per day or more (the amount found in three 5-ounce cups of coffee), may cause miscarriage and complications in delivery. Drink caffeinated beverages in moderation. A moderate level of caffeine intake (150–300 milligrams per day) has no negative effect.

<i>Drink</i>	<i>Caffeine (milligrams)</i>
Coffee, 8 ounces, home brewed	60
Coffee, 16 ounces (medium), coffee shop	260–400 depending on the brand
Cola drink, 12 ounce can	35–40
Green or black tea, 8 ounces	50–60
Energy drink, 8 ounce can	80
Energy drink, 16 ounce bottle	150–400 depending on the brand

Bottom line: drink caffeinated beverages in moderation.

There is so much to stay away from, avoid, and suspect while you are pregnant. Make intelligent choices about what you eat and drink during pregnancy to increase your chance of having a healthy normal baby.

A good beginning makes the difference.

Resources

- American Pregnancy Association. (2007). *Caffeine Intake During Pregnancy*. Retrieved July 18, 2008, from: <http://www.americanpregnancy.org/pregnancyhealth/caffeine.html>.
- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. (2007). *FAQs for the General Public*. Retrieved July 18, 2008, from: <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/FAQs/General-English/default.htm>.
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