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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. When under stress, your body makes physical and chemical changes to try to protect it.

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. Due to 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, inability to focus or to make decisions, or unable to 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?

Some stress can be healthy. However, being under extreme 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 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.

Are conditions, caused by stress, 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 cause my baby to have a birth defect?

It is unlikely that stress, alone, is able to 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, or low birth weight. 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 itself increases the risk 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 risk for birth defects. In fact, it may be more harmful to the pregnancy if some conditions are not treated. By calling OTIS toll free at 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 specific medicines during breastfeeding call OTIS at 1-866-626-6847.

What are ways to reduce stress?

- Talk about your feelings with friends, family, your boss, and/or professionals.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help.
- Follow good health habits:
 - Don't: smoke, drink alcohol or take 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.
 - Follow an exercise plan approved by your health care provider.
- Avoid situations and people that cause you stress.

- 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, 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.

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