



Stress and Pregnancy

Question: Can too much stress harm my baby?

Stress itself is not harmful. Stress is a universal creative force, everywhere and inescapable. All growth and transformation involve stress. For women, the first three months of pregnancy are especially stressful, especially creative. Your body is forming the placenta, a space-age-surpassing gas and nutrient exchange system through which you are building and sustaining a whole new human organism. Your body temperature rises and metabolism increases. Your blood volume increases by 40%, putting heavy demands on your heart, kidneys, and circulatory system. At the same time, you are navigating all the complex relationships and schedules of your work-a-day life, without the positive perks of looking pregnant! No wonder most women feel exhausted and queasy in their first trimester! Susceptible genes, added life stress, or a general difficulty with transformative processes can make the creative stress of normal pregnancy “too much stress.” The fine line between necessary and harmful stress lies in different places for different women.

Generally, stress that harms you harms your fetus. For example, CRH is a hormone made in large quantities by the placenta in preparation for normal full-term delivery. It is also released into your bloodstream during periods of stress. Research has shown that if the rise in CRH begins too early in pregnancy, it may trigger premature delivery. Researchers believe that psychological stress experienced early in pregnancy may lead to an abnormally rapid rise of CRH that triggers premature birth. Birth prior to 37 weeks and birth weight less than 5.5 pounds are among the most persistent and serious problems in maternal-child health. The United States has the highest rate of preterm birth of all western nations, and – despite spending more per person than any other western nation on healthcare – that rate is not decreasing. Increasing stress might be one explanation.

The health of your baby across his or her lifespan may be hardwired in the womb. Preterm birth, for example, has been conclusively linked to cardiovascular disease in both genders later in life. Elevated stress hormone levels in the early third trimester of pregnancy may lead to childhood behavioral problems. The fight-or-flight hormone, cortisol, which raises your blood pressure so that you can more quickly respond to a threat, in the fetus seems to irreversibly raise the set-point for blood pressure and increase susceptibility to stress in adulthood. Prenatal programming “is equally if not more important than our genes in determining how we perform mentally and physically,” says Dr. Peter Nathanielsz., who researches this topic at Cornell University.

What kind of “too much stress” is most harmful for you and your baby? Researchers say the fetus is most affected by the common hassles of day-to-day living, rather than major life traumas such as death or divorce. “The kind of stress that really seems to be detrimental to the pregnant woman and the fetus involves the daily irritants that are epidemic in our society,” says JoAnne Herman, Ph.D., University of South Carolina College of Nursing in Columbia. I take this to mean things like job deadlines, debts, stalled computers, bad drivers, and other stressed-out people. The noise of our lives – traffic, television, cell phones, radios, beepers – makes it almost impossible to pull your fragmented self together and find peace.

Repeatedly, workplace stress is linked with disease. Researchers in Finland found that among the more than 800 workers they followed over 25 years, those with either high job strain or “effort-reward imbalance” had more than twice the risk of death from heart disease than their happily employed or unemployed peers. Researchers in Ireland found that pregnant women who worked out of the home were five times more likely to develop hypertension or preeclampsia (a hypertensive disease of pregnancy) than their work-at-home sisters, after drinking, smoking, family history and other causes were ruled out. We Americans are working

more than our European and Asian counterparts – over 47 hours a week on average – yet racking up more debt, developing more stress-induced health problems, and experiencing more depression than ever.

But here's the GOOD NEWS: taking even a brief time out from daily worries may dramatically reduce or even eliminate the effects of stress hormones on your own and your baby's health. "The recommendation is that if you are in a stressful situation and you do know that you're pregnant, try and take some interrupted time out, to have just a half hour or an hour where you can relax," says maternal stress researcher Dr. E. Marelyn Wintour, of the University of Melbourne, Australia. You do have the right and the power to unplug, work less, stay home, goof off, sleep. What our producing/consuming culture calls "wasting time" might be the best health investment you can make. It will serve you well in parenting too.

Ask yourself: What makes me feel happy, peaceful, free? Practice that religiously – even if you can carve out only a half-hour a day for your practice. It might be reading a mystery novel before bed, or a good children's book. It might be a lazy walk through the neighborhood, cooking, baking, meandering around your yard, savoring a pastry, or just doing nothing, noiselessly. The words "meditation" and "medicine" have the same root; emptying your frazzled mind will immediately make everything better.

Nutrition, sleep, and physical activity are basic life needs that go unmet, when we are stressed. Furthermore, they form a positive feedback triangle – an imbalance in one throws the others off balance. Many of us limp through our days substituting coffee and chocolate for sleep and sleep for protein or a renewing walk. We buy club memberships to work off weight we wouldn't have gained in the first place had we spent the time cooking real food or really resting our stressed-out, endorphin-deficient, insulin-resistant bodies. The first trimester of pregnancy may be especially challenging for maintaining balance. You may be nauseated and exhausted and feel as if you hardly know yourself. Discover the relief of listening to your body: nap when you feel tired, find foods that fill your cravings, and cultivate activities that fill you with the abundance of your own being.

Protein is important for maintaining balance. Spacing protein meals throughout the day helps keep your blood sugar levels stable and affords you sounder sleep. In terms of your fetus, protein aids the function of an enzyme in your placenta that disarms harmful hormone levels. The maternal stress hormone, cortisol, is deactivated by your placenta this way. If you eat meat and animal products, choose micronutrient-rich organic options, where animals have not been raised and killed in stressful, disease-prone conditions.

When Margaret Mead was asked in the 1960s how we can best prepare our children for a rapidly changing and accelerating world, she said, "Teach them how to choose." Ultimately, if you are feeling overly stressed, you might want to examine the nuts and bolts of your daily life and choose even seemingly small directions toward fulfilling your basic needs and happiness. No step is too small – you will feel immediately better.

Resources:

Newsweek, September, 1999

Life in the Womb, by Dr. Peter Nathanielsz

The Art of Doing Nothing, by Veronique Vienne

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This text was originally published in the Willy Street Co-op Reader in the **Ask the Midwife** column, where Ingrid Andersson of Community Midwives, LLC in Madison, answers questions on pregnancy, childbirth and related topics. More of these articles can be found at Ingrid's website: www.gentlehomebirth.org