

Stress

This sheet is about stress in pregnancy or while breastfeeding. This information should not take the place of medical care and advice from your healthcare provider.

What is stress?

Stress is the way the body reacts to something that is unusual, dangerous, unknown, or disturbing. Stress can come from any event or thought. When under stress, your body undergoes physical, chemical, and emotional changes. Almost anything can cause stress, and everyone experiences it at some point in their life. Stress can make people feel frustrated, overwhelmed, angry, or nervous. Everyone deals with stress in their own way. A very stressful situation for one person may not be all that stressful for another. Because we all have different reactions to stress, it is hard to study how stress may affect pregnancy or breastfeeding.

What are some of the symptoms of stress?

- Physical symptoms: Chest pain, rapid heart rate, breathing problems, headaches, vision problems, teeth grinding, dizziness, fatigue, stomach problems, and muscle aches
- Mental symptoms: Confusion, memory loss, nightmares, problems focusing, having a hard time making decisions, and changes in sleeping patterns
- Emotional symptoms: Feelings of anxiety, guilt, grief, fear, irritability, worry, frustration, loneliness, or being overwhelmed. May include periods of anger or crying
- Social symptoms: Staying away from friends and family, eating too much or too little, drinking too much alcohol, and using drugs

Should I be concerned about stress?

In small amounts, stress can be positive and healthy. However, being under a lot of stress over time might affect health and well-being. Stress can increase a person's chance of developing conditions like high blood pressure or depression. Stress might also cause existing medical problems to worsen. For example, if someone has diabetes and is under stress, it may be hard for them to keep their blood sugar levels under control. If stress is causing you to have symptoms, please talk about them with your healthcare provider.

Can stress make it harder for me to become pregnant?

Many factors affect someone's ability to get pregnant. There have been multiple studies that suggest stress might make it harder for individuals to get pregnant. Unfortunately, these studies have limitations and are not able to give clear guidelines on how different amounts of stress or the length of time a person is experiencing stress may affect their ability to get pregnant. If you are struggling getting pregnant and this is causing you stress, please discuss this with your healthcare provider.

I just found out that I am pregnant. What are some ways to reduce my stress level?

- Don't be afraid to ask for help
- Talk about your feelings with people you trust including friends, family, and/or healthcare/mental health professionals
- Follow good health habits: avoid smoking, drinking alcohol, or taking illegal drugs; take your prescribed medication as directed; eat a healthy diet; drink plenty of water; rest; and follow an exercise plan approved by your healthcare provider
- Try to have fun and do things that you enjoy
- Consider practicing mindfulness or doing meditation

Will the medications used to treat potential health effects of stress, like high blood pressure, ulcers, or depression, hurt my baby?

Many medications can be used during pregnancy. In fact, it may be more harmful to a pregnancy if some conditions are not treated. Contact MotherToBaby to talk with a specialist about specific medication(s) during pregnancy and breastfeeding.

Can stress increase the chance of miscarriage?

Miscarriage can occur in any pregnancy. Multiple studies suggest that a lot of stress during pregnancy could increase the chance of a miscarriage. However, it is hard to know if the increased chance for miscarriage is from stress alone or if it is due to things that a person may be doing to relieve the stress such as poor eating habits, smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, or misusing drugs. It is currently unknown if stress on its own increases the chance of miscarriage.

Does stress increase the chance of birth defects?

Every pregnancy starts with a 3-5% chance of having a birth defect. This is called the background risk. It is difficult to measure stress and to study its effects on pregnancy. However, it is unlikely that stress alone will increase the chance of birth defects.

Can stress cause pregnancy complications?

Some studies suggest that stress can contribute to preterm delivery (birth before 37 weeks of pregnancy) or low birth weight. However, because everyone responds to stressful situations in their own way and has different perceptions on how stressful a situation is, there is no clear information on if stress alone causes these complications.

Can stress in pregnancy cause long-term problems?

Some studies have linked stress during pregnancy to an increased chance of the child(ren) developing mental health and behavioral problems later in life. Although there are studies identifying links between stress and these problems, there is currently not enough research to determine if it is solely stress increasing the chance for these conditions or if it is a combination of factors from during and after pregnancy.

Can stress affect breastfeeding?

Stress may cause problems with breastfeeding. For some people, breastfeeding itself can feel overwhelming and stressful. It can be helpful for a person who is breastfeeding to have support while nursing such as a breastfeeding support group, a lactation specialist, and/or friends or family members who will help and support them. If you are experiencing difficulty breastfeeding, please contact your healthcare provider.

If a male is stressed, could it affect fertility (ability to get partner pregnant) or increase the chance of birth defects?

Some studies have suggested that stress can affect fertility. In general, exposures that fathers or sperm donors have are unlikely to increase the risks to a pregnancy. For more information, please see the MotherToBaby fact sheet Paternal Exposures at <https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/paternal-exposures-pregnancy/>.

Where can I get help?

It is important to get help from a professional before your stress level becomes out of control. Healthcare providers, mental health professionals or counselors, can help you find the resources and assistance needed to cope with stress.

Please click [here](#) for references.

Questions? Call 866.626.6847 | Text 855.999.3525 | Email or Chat at [MotherToBaby.org](https://www.MotherToBaby.org).

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