

Today's Health for the Empowered Woman

GOOD HABITS FOR PREGNANCY

In previous articles I have focused on ultrasound in pregnancy, the importance of keeping visits and of getting lab work done. It is imperative to now discuss health and living habits in pregnancy that, when bad and deviate from a healthy life style, adversely affect the pregnancy and therefore the developing fetus and child.

My office is besieged by calls from women who, before knowing that they were pregnant, had a few alcoholic drinks or had an x-ray, or even had used marijuana or a prescription drug—narcotic or not. As a general rule we advise women who are planning to become pregnant of a few simple rules. Take any prenatal vitamin, even those over the counter, and be sure that it has one milligram of folic acid (prevents certain neural tube defects such as spina bifida). Do not drink any alcohol, take no narcotics, call us for advice on prescription drugs, and when trying to become pregnant always assume that she is. For example, a woman gets in a car accident and goes to the emergency room. When queried: “are you pregnant?”, the answer should be: “I MIGHT be.” This way precautions concerning drugs and x-rays in pregnancy will be properly addressed by the professional staff. However, in virtually all cases the safety of the mother is taken into account because anything that is adverse for her is adverse for the fetus but the choice of nontreatment might make things worse.

Getting back to the original premise, if a woman did use alcohol, drugs, or x-rays during early pregnancy, we can look up the drug and decide how harmful it might be. The effects of alcohol are cumulative so one drink will probably have no effect. Likewise radiation is cumulative so much depends on the type of x-ray—cat scan, mri, etc. And, of course, much depends on the stage of pregnancy. The first twelve weeks are when organs are forming and certain drugs and large amounts of radiation can certainly, but rarely, cause fetal defects.

Consistent with the title of this article obstetrical care providers now more than ever are dealing with very bad lifestyle habits that are adverse to the immediate and longterm health of the mother and to development and lifetime health of fetus/neonate/child. Maybe the biggest problem is smoking. One must quit during pregnancy. It is well known that in addition to the risk of cancer and other diseases in the mom, it can cause premature birth, bleeding, early separation of the placenta and impairment of the fetus's neurological development. We do advocate the use of certain patches to aid in quitting during pregnancy because they have less nicotine than cigarettes. Alcoholic drinks must be avoided. There is ample documentation of the ravages of the Fetal Alcohol Syndrome as well as prematurity and bleeding. Even one drink a day should be avoided. Previous articles have addressed obesity but more needs to be said here: we do give diet instructions and they should be adhered to: avoid all fast foods, carbonated beverages with or without sugar, caffeine kept to a minimum. A diet high in protein to include meat, fish, eggs and vegetables is ideal. A quart of milk a day (preferably skim) is necessary for calcium—if unable to drink milk, cheese is a good substitute and the harder the cheese (cheddar, for example) the higher the calcium content. Pregnant women seem to crave sugar but it passes directly to the fetus and

can cause diabetes in the mom and very large, hard to deliver babies. One can give in to cravings occasionally but leave the candy bars at the grocery store.

I cannot emphasize enough that correct clothing is important for both support and hygiene. Good support shoes and support stockings will make a pregnant woman feel better and flip flops should be out of the wardrobe especially in Oswego winters. Stretch pants and adjustable waist bands are more comfortable than tight jeans.

Personal hygiene is important to all people but especially in pregnancy: careful tooth brushing reduces risk of decay and disease of the gums that is associated with premature birth. Daily showering reduces skin bacteria and there is no proscription against tub baths unless it becomes difficult to get in or out of the tub. Perfumes and lotions are fine as long as the pregnant woman herself is not repulsed by the smell as this sense changes profoundly during pregnancy. In a normal pregnancy sexual intimacy depends on the comfort level of the couple and is not proscribed.

I most definitely advocate exercise that is within reason during pregnancy. I have taken care of tennis players, runners, gym teachers and yoga masters and by far they have easier deliveries. A body that is fit produces contractions during labor that are more in sync with getting the cervix to dilate. A stronger core aids in the huge propulsive forces that are necessary during the pushing stage. We have all seen and it is well noted that an obese unfit pregnant woman has a terrible time in labor and a much higher chance of cesarean section with the attendant risks of bleeding, infection, anesthesia, etc.

In summary, when trying to conceive always assume that you could be pregnant and when you definitely are pregnant seek prenatal care early and follow the advice that well trained professionals are giving you. Read the handouts and information and when in doubt, ask!

This article would not be complete without a discussion of illicit substances. Marijuana and hashish are known to cause limb reduction defects in the fetus and even small amounts can impair neurologic development that is not remedial. Cocaine is a powerful vasoconstrictor and therefore can choke off the blood vessels in the placenta causing small babies, bleeding, early separation of the placenta and even fetal death. Prescription pain pills and antianxiety medications must be discussed with the obstetrical provider to weigh the risks versus benefits.

A woman who has good habits during pregnancy is not only empowering herself but her child as well.