

Myths in Pregnancy: Part 2

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The initial prenatal visit is a prime opportunity to discuss myths vs. facts regarding pregnancy. In 2010, I wrote an article for this column addressing many pregnancy myths. Let's talk about some of the latest most commonly debated topics:

FISH: This is a food that is high in quality protein, low in saturated fat, and full of wonderful omega-3 fatty acids. The only downside relates to the higher order fish that may accumulate mercury in their flesh. Mercury can impair fetal and newborn neurological development. Which fish to look out for? Shark, swordfish, king mackerel, tilefish, whale and albacore are the biggest culprits because they are fish with long lives that eat many other fish. When buying canned tuna, avoid "albacore" and purchase "chunk light tuna." Locally caught bass and trout here in the greater Yellowstone area are not a problem with regards to mercury content. Seafood options that are great in pregnancy include salmon, shellfish, shrimp, tilapia, and other types of smaller white fish.

SUSHI: Great news for sushi lovers! Infectious diseases from raw fish are virtually a non-problem in the United States, because most sushi is flash frozen, which kills most pathogens. Sushi in general is safe and a healthy option for pregnant women.

CHEESE and DELI MEAT: The bacteria we are worried about in unpasteurized milk and cheese is called listeria. It reaches most people through inadequately cooked hot dogs; and in California it is transmitted primarily via queso fresco. The FDA and U.S. Department of Agriculture advise pregnant women not to eat hot dogs or lunch meats unless they are re-heated to steaming, and to avoid unpasteurized cheese, milk, refrigerated pates, meat spreads, and smoked seafood.

CAFFEINE: Coffee and tea drinkers, take heart. Recent and high quality research shows that there are no adverse effects on pregnancy in women with moderate caffeine intake. Initial studies that linked caffeine to birth defects, low birthweight, and miscarriage have been completely disproven. A recent randomized controlled trial of very high quality found no association between moderate caffeine intake and birth weight and congenital anomalies.

ALCOHOL: 10% of pregnant women report drinking alcohol regularly, and 2% report binge drinking. There is no safe level of alcohol intake during pregnancy. We know alcohol is neurotoxic, and every mother's ability to clear the alcohol from her system is different. Alcohol use is the #1 preventable cause of mental retardation in the developed nations. Because of the neurotoxic nature of alcohol, even a small amount will kill fetal brain cells, hence the effect on the developing baby's brain can be anywhere on the neurologic damage spectrum. The worst case scenario is fetal alcohol syndrome or fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. Why go there? **DON'T DRINK** when pregnant!

NICOTINE: The tricky problem with nicotine is not just that it is associated with poor health behaviors, but that people know it's bad: hence up to 50% of pregnant women don't disclose that they smoke. Smoking in pregnancy is associated with miscarriage, abruption, ectopic pregnancy, and preterm delivery. It is also strongly associated with infertility. Unfortunately, among mothers who quit smoking during pregnancy, 90% relapse after delivery, and their babies and children are at risk of lung disease (such as asthma) because of second hand smoke. If you relapse after delivery, be sure to smoke only outside, away from children. Pregnancy is a GREAT time to quit smoking or chewing tobacco, not just for baby's health but mom's too!

HOT TUBS: Soaking during the first trimester, or any time in pregnancy in water heated to 100 degrees F or higher is associated with problems for the baby in utero. Two studies suggest that overheating the body's core temperature is linked to fetal loss and some birth defects. Fortunately, most women will become very uncomfortable in a hot tub when the core temperature rises, and will not want to stay in the water. A good rule of thumb is to avoid hot tubs in the first trimester, then only use them in moderation with the water cooler than 100 degrees F.

HAIR DYE: You go, girl! There is no evidence that hair dyes cause problems in utero. But, I generally recommend that women try to use organic and less long-acting hair dyes. If in doubt, make sure the dye does not come in contact with the scalp.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of myths regarding pregnancy, but this list does include the most common issues encountered here in the U.S. and out on the Internet. When in doubt, ask your prenatal care provider.