

PATIENT EDUCATION GUIDE

If you have asthma and are pregnant, you may wonder whether your asthma will complicate your pregnancy or make the baby's delivery more difficult. You may ask yourself, "Will my asthma harm the baby?" or, "Will I be well enough to make it through pregnancy and delivery?" This guide will answer your questions and explain what you can do to achieve the best possible outcome for you and your baby.

Taking care of asthma when you're pregnant

How common is asthma during pregnancy?

About one of every 100 pregnant women has asthma, making it the most common breathing difficulty that doctors take care of during pregnancies. The vast majority of women with asthma have successful pregnancy and deliver a normal child.

Will asthma worsen during pregnancy?

Asthma may worsen, or even improve, during pregnancy; it is hard to predict. If you have had asthma for a long time, you will probably have similar symptoms during pregnancy. If your asthma does worsen (which is unlikely), you and your doctor can work together to control it.

To keep your asthma from getting worse during pregnancy, follow your treatment program carefully and avoid the "triggers" that make you wheeze (see "Asthma triggers to avoid", next page). Your doctor will help you identify these triggers and can offer tips on how to stay away from them. For example, it helps to avoid spending time with people who have colds, the flu, or other respiratory infections and to avoid breathing irritating fumes, especially cigarette smoke.

Can I continue to take my asthma medicines?

The most important thing to remember is: Asthma that is out of control is far more dangerous than the side effects that may be caused by asthma medicines.

For most patients, the drugs used to control asthma appear to be safe during pregnancy. But as a precaution, your doctor will ask you to use as little medicine as possible. This is especially important during the first ten weeks of pregnancy, when any drug is most likely to affect the baby.

Your doctor may ask you to take inhaled medicines instead of the medicines you usually take by mouth. You and the baby are less likely to experience serious side effects from inhaled drugs.

Is it safe to get allergy or flu shots?

If you were receiving allergy shots before you became pregnant, your doctor will probably continue them during your pregnancy. Some vaccines, such as flu shots, are also safe during pregnancy, but it is best that you arrange to receive them after the first three months of pregnancy.

What else can I do?

- **See your doctors regularly.** Keep regular appointments with both the doctor who will be delivering your baby and the doctor who regularly takes care of your asthma. The physical and emotional changes you may experience during pregnancy could require that your treatment program be adjusted.
- **Stay alert for any worsening of asthma.** Watch for any breakthrough breathing problems and tell your doctor about them right away so that your treatment program can be adjusted immediately. If you know from previous experience that your asthma may worsen without your realizing it, your doctor can prescribe an easy-to-use peak flow meter. Keeping a daily record of "peak flows" will let you know when your asthma is slowly getting worse, or when there has been a sudden change.
- **Avoid using over-the-counter asthma drugs.** Stay away from asthma drugs that you can buy without a prescription, unless your doctor has told you about one that you may use when needed. It is safer and more effective if you regularly use the medicines your doctor has prescribed, rather than turn to over-the-counter drugs in a "crisis". And, since you may not do well with some cold or cough medicines during pregnancy, you should ask your doctor before using one of them.
- **Exercise regularly, but with moderation.** With your doctor's help, develop an exercise program to suit your needs and interests. But be sure to check with your doctor before you sign up for any exercise class.

The best exercises are those that help you to relax and tone your muscles, without affecting your normal breathing. Swimming and brisk walking are especially good. Some types of exercise, such as yoga and t'ai chi, are ideal for pregnant women with asthma. These exercises can stretch and tone your muscles, relax the body, and calm the emotions.

Avoid swimming under water and exercising in the mountains, since these activities may make you short of oxygen. Also, you should avoid vigorous exercise during the second half of your pregnancy.

- **Control your weight.** Normal weight gain during pregnancy does not harm breathing, but excess weight makes it more difficult to tolerate the discomfort of asthma.

Do I need special plans for labor and delivery?

Fortunately, most women with asthma do not have special breathing problems during labor and delivery. However, if your asthma is poorly controlled, the stress of labor might cause a severe asthma attack, making a cesarean delivery necessary. It is most important to work with your doctors to plan treatment during labor if your asthma is poorly controlled.

ADDITIONS:

Asthma triggers to avoid

- **Tobacco smoke**
- **Dust, mold, and pollen**
- **Animal dander**
- **Air pollution (indoors and outdoors)**
- **Foods containing sulfites or MSG, or other foods to which you are allergic**
- **Aspirin and similar painkillers**
- **Colds, flu, and other respiratory infections**
- **Strong odors, as from fresh paint and perfumes**

Tips to remember

- **Keep regular appointments with both the doctor who is caring for your pregnancy and the doctor looking after your asthma.**
- **Follow your treatment program carefully.**
- **Stay alert for any worsening of asthma, and tell your doctor about it.**
- **Avoid asthma triggers.**
- **Avoid using asthma drugs that you can buy without a prescription.**
- **Take your prescribed drugs conscientiously.**
- **Work with your doctor to develop an exercise plan.**
- **Control your weight.**