

STRESS AND PREGNANCY: THE HIDDEN HAZARD

By

Peter McCarthy, ND

In my earlier articles, you have undoubtedly learned by now that stress is a systemic phenomenon. By that I mean that the body under stress demonstrates changes in virtually EVERY organ system. The brain, the digestive tract, the heart, the detoxification system, plus many more are transformed in the presence of chronic stress. But of all the bodily functions, nothing is more profoundly impacted by stress than a woman's pregnancy.

In order to understand the reasons for this, we need to comprehend, at the most basic level, the interrelationship between the woman and her developing fetus. The entire process of physiological change in a woman's body throughout her pregnancy is designed to provide a safe, nurturing, healthful environment for her developing child. That is why virtually every pregnant mother is advised to take good care of herself throughout the pregnancy: eat healthfully; get plenty of rest; don't smoke or drink, etc. These are all wise and helpful pieces of advice. But what about stress? This part of an expectant mom's lifestyle is virtually ignored. Yet it has as profound an impact as any of the other factors on the likelihood of a successful delivery.

The reason is that an expectant mother under chronic stress significantly changes the experience and the outcome of a pregnancy, for both mother and child, in ways that most people are unaware of. Under stress, the body secretes a hormone called cortisol, which assists the body in dealing with the pain and inflammation that accompanies the stress response. When a body is experiencing chronic stress, conditions can be created which overwhelm the body's ability to secrete adequate cortisol. This is challenging enough for the average person, but can become almost insurmountable for the expectant mother.

A new mother under chronic stress will usually experience a very difficult first trimester, punctuated by frequent morning sickness, increased sensitivities to certain foods, and a general feeling of fatigue and unwellness. This is due to the fact that the developing fetus itself is adding a new source of stress to an already overwhelmed body.

As the pregnancy enters its second trimester, however, Mom starts to feel better. The baby's own adrenals are now developing, and they provide increasing amounts of cortisol to assist the stressed-out mother.

By the beginning of the third trimester, Mom is feeling GREAT! The baby's fully developed adrenals are churning away to help Mom. In the process, however, the baby's adrenals actually OVER-develop, creating a condition called hyperadrenalism. It is a sad comment on our stressed-out society that we are the only Western nation to consider hyperadrenalism in newborn children a normal condition.

This unbalanced condition comes to a conclusion when the baby is delivered, with significant negative consequences for both mother and child. A newly delivered baby with overdeveloped adrenal glands is typically fussy, temperamental, and difficult for the new Mom to deal with.

But the much bigger challenge is presented to the mother. At a time when her body is attempting to normalize itself hormonally, it is unable to do so. That's because the stress and reproductive hormones are derived from the same raw material, and the survival-

related stress hormones will always be synthesized first. This condition was temporarily alleviated when the baby's adrenals were assisting Mom, but now there is no help, and the already excessive stress level is greatly increased by the additional duties of new motherhood. Add to this the above mentioned fussy baby, and the stage is set for an all-too-common scenario: fatigue, mood swings, and episodes of depression, all manifestations of what the medical community calls post-partum depression.

Are there solutions? Absolutely! Besides following the traditional advice for health maintenance, expectant mothers need to eliminate or minimize controllable sources of stress. This includes avoiding/eliminating foods and beverages which either directly cause a stress response or contribute to it: caffeine beverages, chocolate, processed sugar, white flour. Additionally, foods which help both mother and baby should be increased: cold water fish, raw nuts and seeds, good sources of protein.

Since virtually no one gets all the nutrients they need these days from food, the medical community wisely prescribes a pre-natal vitamin for most expectant Moms. For those experiencing chronic stress, this should be supplemented with significant additional Vitamin C and B complex, as well as generous portions of essential fatty acid supplements (primarily good quality fish oil). These all are nutrients which the body needs to deal with stress, and the likelihood of a fully successful pregnancy will be greatly increased by adding them to one's diet.

There are many other natural things which expectant mothers can do to help themselves and their babies. Virtually all of them can be integrated into one's lifestyle with no contraindications. Contact us, and we'll show you how to use them.

Peter M. McCarthy, N.D. is a graduate of Trinity College of Natural Health in Warsaw, IN and is nationally certified as a traditional naturopath by the American Naturopathic Certification Board. He and his wife, Nancy, are co-owners of Life Energy Holistic Partners in Helotes, TX. They specialize in stress management, detoxification, weight management, and energy balancing. They may be reached at (210) 372-0002 or by e-mail at lifeenergyholisticcenter@earthlink.net for appointments. Office hours are by appointment. For further information please visit their web site at www.lifeenergyholisticcenter.com.