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United States Environmental Protection Agency

Climate Change and the Health of Pregnant Women

Understanding the threats that climate change poses to human health can help us work together to lower risks and be prepared.
Climate change threatens human health, including mental health, and access to clean air, safe drinking water, nutritious food, and shelter. Everyone is affected by climate change at some point in their lives. Some people are more affected by climate change than others because of factors like where they live; their age, health, income, and occupation; and how they go about their day-to-day life.

Most women have healthy pregnancies and healthy babies. However, climate change can worsen environmental hazards that threaten the health of pregnant women and increase health risks for the baby, such as:

- **Low weight of the baby at birth.** If a baby weighs less than 5.5 pounds at birth, there may be lasting effects on health.
- **Pre-term birth.** Labor that starts before 37 weeks of pregnancy is considered pre-term, and may lead to health problems.

Air pollutants can cause respiratory illness in pregnant women and also lead to low birth weight or pre-term birth. Climate change worsens air quality because warming temperatures make it easier for ground-level ozone to form. Changing weather patterns and more intense and frequent wildfires also raise the amount of pollution, dust, and smoke in the air.

Climate change will also cause extreme heat events to become more frequent and severe, which can lead to dehydration and renal (kidney) failure in pregnant women. Dehydration early in pregnancy can affect the baby's growth and later in pregnancy can cause pre-term birth.

What is climate change and why does it matter for health?

We've all heard of it, but what exactly is climate change? Greenhouse gases act like a blanket around Earth, trapping energy in the atmosphere. Human activities, especially burning fossil fuels for energy, increase the amount of greenhouse gases in our atmosphere and cause the climate to warm. **Climate** is the typical or average weather for an area. **Climate change** is any change in average weather that lasts for a long period of time, like warming temperatures. Climate change affects the food we eat, the air we breathe, and the water we drink. It also leads to extreme weather events, like flooding, droughts, and wildfires. All of these impacts affect human health.

It is important that pregnant women and their families understand potential exposures and work with their clinicians to minimize exposure to environmental risks so they can protect their health and the health of their babies.

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Under a changing climate, hurricane intensity and rainfall are expected to increase and floods may occur more often or be more severe. These types of extreme weather events increase health risks to pregnant women. Poor nutrition and diarrhea from contaminated water or food have been linked to negative birth outcomes such as low birth weight. Floods can lead to an increase in exposure to toxins and mold. Severe weather events may damage homes, other buildings, and roads or require evacuations, which can make it more difficult for pregnant women to get the specialized health care they need.

Physical outcomes related to environmental hazards are not the only concern for pregnant women. Pregnant women and women who have recently given birth (postpartum) are at an increased risk for severe stress and other negative mental health outcomes due to weather-related disasters associated with climate change. Severe maternal stress can increase risk of negative outcomes such as pre-term birth.

This fact sheet is based on "The Impacts of Climate Change on Human Health in the United States: A Scientific Assessment." To explore the full report, go to:

https://health2016.globalchange.gov

Learn More

Climate Change and the Health of Children
https://www3.epa.gov/climatechange/impacts/health/factsheets/

Climate Change: Human Health
https://www3.epa.gov/climatechange/impacts/health.html

Climate Change: What You Can Do
https://www3.epa.gov/climatechange/wycd/

Effects of Disasters on Pregnant Women
http://www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/emergency/

How you can Limit Climate Impacts During Pregnancy:

Your local health department can provide you with information about cooling centers, disaster preparedness, and other issues of concern to you.

Health Department Finder:
www.cdc.gov/mmwr/international/relres.html

Visit websites to review the weather, air quality, water quality, pollen count, and beach closures in your area.

Weather: www.weather.gov/

AirNow (air quality and pollen): www.airnow.gov

WaterAlert (water quality):
http://water.usgs.gov/wateralert/

EPA Beach (beach closures and notifications):
https://www.epa.gov/beaches/find-information-about-your-beach

Talk to your doctor about any contaminants you think you may have come in contact with, or may be at risk of encountering, and any additional concerns.

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