



Pregnancy and Your Heart Health

Pregnancy can be a very exciting time—and a time to make your health a priority. Here we talk about pregnancy-related heart health issues that may be of particular concern to African American women.

High blood pressure—even if you’ve had normal blood pressure

A type of high blood pressure that occurs only during pregnancy, generally in the second half, is called preeclampsia. More African American women develop it, compared to white women.

Having diabetes, being obese, and some other health problems make it more likely that you’ll get preeclampsia. But it’s important that your health care provider check you for preeclampsia even if you don’t have those problems. Although it’s rare, preeclampsia can quickly turn into a serious, even deadly condition, particularly for African American women.

Symptoms of preeclampsia

Women who have preeclampsia often don’t feel sick. However, some mild symptoms to watch for are:

- Your hands, face, or eyes look swollen.
- You suddenly (over 1 to 2 days) gain weight, or you gain more than 2 pounds a week.

Symptoms of severe preeclampsia include:

- A headache that doesn’t go away
- Trouble breathing
- Belly pain on your right side below your ribs or pain in your right shoulder
- Peeing less than normal
- Nausea and vomiting
- Vision problems
- Feeling faint

Treatment varies depending on how bad your preeclampsia is.

- You may need to go to the hospital. If you get preeclampsia, you’re at a greater risk of having a miscarriage or of having a stillborn (born dead) baby.
- You’ll also need to take extra care of your heart after having your baby. Having preeclampsia increases the likelihood of having heart disease or a stroke later in life.





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Diabetes during pregnancy

A type of diabetes that occurs only during pregnancy, usually in the later weeks, is gestational diabetes. It causes your blood sugar (blood glucose) to get too high, even if you didn't have blood sugar problems before you became pregnant. Gestational diabetes goes away, but only after the baby is born.

Usually, gestational diabetes has no symptoms. If you do have symptoms, they may be mild, like being thirstier than normal or having to pee more often.

You're at greater risk of having gestational diabetes as an African American woman, and also if you:

- Are older than age 25
- Are overweight
- Have family members with type 2 diabetes
- Have a condition called polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)

Get tested and treated

If you have gestational diabetes, controlling your blood sugar levels will help you protect yourself and your baby. If not treated, gestational diabetes increases your risk of having a miscarriage or of having a stillborn baby.

It can also cause your baby to:

- Be born too early
- Be born with blood sugar and breathing problems
- Become overweight

If you have gestational diabetes, you're more likely to develop preeclampsia and to have diabetes later in life.

Protect yourself from gestational diabetes

You can do a lot to prevent gestational diabetes. It's particularly important before and during your pregnancy to eat healthy and be physically active. Talk to your doctor about programs that will help you do both. If you're overweight, try to lose weight before you get pregnant. (Pregnant women shouldn't try to lose weight.) Ask your health care provider how much weight you should gain during your pregnancy.



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Physical activity and pregnancy

Physical activity is good for your health, mood, and weight before, during, and after your pregnancy. If you're already active, stick with it as long as you're healthy. If you weren't active before you became pregnant, it's fine to begin now, gradually. But also ask your health care provider about what type of physical activities are safe during pregnancy and soon after delivery.

Smoking and pregnancy

It's important to quit smoking before you get pregnant. Smoking during pregnancy increases the chance of the baby being born with birth defects, too early, or underweight, or even dying. Babies whose mothers smoked when pregnant have a greater risk of dying from SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome).

If the mother continues to smoke after the baby is born, the baby is more likely to get chest colds, ear infections, bronchitis, pneumonia, and asthma.

Make your health a priority

Most women in the United States have healthy pregnancies. However, serious illness (and even death) are becoming more common among pregnant women, particularly among African Americans. Heart disease is the leading cause of death during pregnancy or childbirth. Take care of your heart health. Your family needs you.