



Education

Abuse During Pregnancy

If your husband or boyfriend abused you before pregnancy, you are definitely at risk for being abused during pregnancy. However, abuse often begins or gets worse when you are pregnant.

What is abuse?

Abuse may be mental, physical, or sexual. Mental abuse includes:

- promising or threatening to hit you
- forcing you to perform degrading or humiliating acts
- threatening to harm your other children, a baby sitter, or companion of your children
- attacking or destroying your pets or valued things
- controlling your life so much that you are uncomfortable.

Physical abuse includes:

- grabbing you so hard that it leaves red marks or bruises on your body
- throwing things at you
- pushing or shoving
- hitting, slapping, kicking, choking, punching, or slamming you against things, or beating you up
- attacking you with a knife, gun, rope, or electrical cord.

Sexual abuse includes:

- forcing you to have vaginal, oral, or anal intercourse against your will
- biting you on the breasts or in the genital area
- shoving things into your vagina
- making you do sexual acts with other people or animals.

How does abuse during pregnancy occur?

A new baby may be a threat to an abusive and jealous man who will soon have to share his partner's time and attention with the child. The added responsibility of having a child can also make an abuser angry.

The pregnancy may be a threat to an abusive and controlling man because each time you see your health care provider, other people might influence you.

An insecure man may dislike your changing body appearance in late pregnancy and this may trigger abuse.

A man who responds to stress, frustration, or anger with violence may target your breasts and belly for punches or kicks. He may try to hurt you and harm the baby.

What are the effects?

You may not get the prenatal care you need because of fear that the health care provider will find out about your abuse. Your abuser may discourage or prevent you from getting medical care. You may blame yourself even though it is not your fault.

Stress caused by abuse affects your ability to take care of yourself during your pregnancy. You may continue unhealthy habits such as smoking, drinking alcohol, using drugs, and not eating a healthy diet. You may not be able to sleep or relax.

Dangers to your unborn baby include:

- delayed prenatal care
- miscarriage
- low birth weight
- premature birth
- stillbirth (death of the baby before it is born)
- bleeding from the vagina.

If your children see family violence or are abused themselves, they can be deeply affected by it. They may have stomachaches, headaches, diarrhea, or problems with bed-wetting and sleeping. Often they have trouble in school. Children may come to think that violence is a way of dealing with problems. Abused children are more likely to get into an abusive relationship when they grow up.

Abuse to an unborn child, child abuse, or fear of child abuse are major reasons why some women leave abusive men.

How can I take care of myself and my unborn child?

- Ask yourself if your relationship is safe.
- Admit you are abused, and that it is not your fault.
- Learn to recognize signs of a possible violent incident before it occurs.
- Plan an emergency exit and get help. In an emergency, call the police or 911. Call your health care provider or go to the emergency room if you are hurt.

When should I seek help?

The usual pattern is for the abuse to continue and to become more severe. The longer you stay in an abusive relationship, the greater the chance you or your baby will be seriously injured. Homicide is the leading cause of death among pregnant women in the United States. If you are being abused, get help now.

For more information see

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