

The Physical and Emotional Stress on Pregnancy: the Jewish Israeli Experience

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Pregnancy can be a very special time in a woman's life. It is usually a time filled with excitement and anticipation and is a journey unlike any other. It is filled with many ups and downs ranging from morning sickness, to marveling nervously at the first ultrasound, to the unbearable heaviness of the last few weeks, leading up to the birth. Despite the many wonderful things associated with pregnancy, physical and emotional stress can sometimes have a negative impact on pregnant women. Doctors often advise women to get plenty of rest in order to relieve stress, in an attempt to reduce any potential harm to the fetus or to the pregnancy. There are certain situations specific to Jewish Israeli women, including fasting on religious fast days and the fear of war and terror, in which women have to be cognizant of the risks that physical and emotional stress poses to fetuses.

Every year during Yom Kippur, pregnant Jewish women face the question of whether or not it is safe to fast. Although it is considered to be a big *mitzvah* to fast on Yom Kippur, exceptions to this *mitzvah* come into consideration between doctors and rabbis because of a life and potential life put at risk.

Many doctors advise against pregnant women fasting since there is reason to believe that fasting can cause premature birth. While many women would like to fast on Yom Kippur, a very holy day in Judaism, most doctors don't recommend it. The *Shulchan Aruch* writes that a person who is seriously ill or may become seriously ill by fasting, is not permitted to fast on Yom Kippur (*Shulchan Aruch Harav, Orach Chaim* 618:1) [1]. Thus, pregnant women may not be obligated to fast if there is a chance of becoming ill or putting the pregnancy in danger of preterm labor. A study on the effects of Yom Kippur reported an increase in preterm deliveries. The study

stated, "the mean delivery rate in the Jewish population was significantly higher during Yom Kippur and the day after" [2]. Another study compared deliveries of Jewish and non-Jewish patients. This research showed that Jewish pregnancies were at a significantly higher risk of preterm delivery during a 25-hour fast. However, although this might be true, the research stated that there was still a need for a larger study to really understand the effects of fasting on delivery outcomes [3].

Another study focused on the effects of fasting on Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av with regard to pregnancy and found that there was an increase in births one day after Yom Kippur and two days after Tisha B'Av. However, there was no significant increase in births one day after Tisha B'Av. The results of the study suggested a random variation in birth rates. In addition, when the birth rates were compared to the overall mean birth rate, there was not a significant difference. This study concluded that a 25-hour fast doesn't necessarily lead to an increase in the birth rate [4]. An additional study noted a special risk of fasting may exist for women who have a tendency toward early delivery [5]. Other researchers found an additional risk to fasting specifically in Israel. The dry and high temperature in Israel can cause a high risk of dehydration and women who have a high tendency of dehydration aren't recommended to fast as it can affect delivery. Such women concerned about being dehydrated should drink liquids in larger quantities before the fast and should try to reduce exertion. Women should also try to avoid being out in the hot weather and stay in air-conditioned environments to take the most effective precautions [6].

Yom Kippur is not the only example of stress endured by Jewish Israeli women during

pregnancy. For many Jews, living in Israel is a dream come true, however, due to the Arab-Israeli conflict in Israel, there have been many wars and terrorist attacks causing stress to its people and everyday life. Many women, regardless of being pregnant, are forced to watch their husbands and loved ones being called to the line of duty. These stress factors, which are an inherent part of being an Israeli citizen, might lead to the development of medical disorders in unborn children. There are many studies conducted which argue both sides of whether there is an effect or not of such stresses on the pregnancy of a Jewish Israeli woman.

An article in the Jerusalem Post discussed the effects of psychological stress on pregnant women. The article stated that there was a link between stress during pregnancy and schizophrenia in children. The article noted that “women who are in the second month of pregnancy when exposed to psychological stress in a war zone or other extreme traumatic events are significantly more likely to give birth to children who eventually develop schizophrenia.” The disorder is found in 1% of Israelis and tends to appear in young adulthood. Additionally, a study found that stress in the second month of pregnancy during the 1967 war in Israel seemed to be linked to a higher incidence of schizophrenia. Girls were 4.3 more likely, and boys were 1.2 times more likely, to develop schizophrenia. Although the study found a significantly higher incidence of schizophrenia, Prof. Arie Shalev, the chief of psychiatry at Hadassah University Medical Center, told the Jerusalem Post that it is still very low incidence and that women should not be frightened. Although this study is important, it does not prove a correlation between the two [7]. Another study using data from Israeli women exposed to the Six-Day War and the Yom Kippur War states that maternal stress during pregnancy is a possible risk

factor for schizophrenia, but the evidence still remains insufficient.

Yom Kippur and the Arab-Israeli conflict are two examples of a myriad of stresses facing Jewish Israeli women during pregnancy. The studies above show that these examples may cause physical and emotional stress on pregnancies. Although this is the case, is it still possible to live normally as a Jewish Israeli woman without worrying too much about the effect. If a woman is thinking of fasting for Yom Kippur or any 25-hour fast, she should consult a doctor and rabbi to request guidance. The majority of rabbis will state that if the woman is still early on in her pregnancy, she should try her best to fast. However, rabbis emphasize that if at any time, a woman feels ill, she should drink some water and eat small amounts of food. This would be true even for women who are in late-term pregnancy, as the goal is to avoid dehydration or inducing preterm labor. Although some argue that there is insufficient evidence of potential health risks associated with fasting while pregnant, women should still keep in mind that the physical stress caused by fasting can lead to preterm labor. Another factor of stress that Jewish Israeli women should be keeping in mind is the emotional stress that comes with living in Israel. Again, many studies say the evidence is insufficient, but there is still reason to be cautious of the correlation of prenatal stress and schizophrenia in children. Overall, Jewish women should not be concerned about living in Israel and the emotional and physical stress associated with it. They can go on to enjoy their pregnancies, as it continues to be the most special time in a woman’s life.

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