4 mins read | Jun 14 2023

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UTIs during pregnancy: Nothing to worry about

Urinary tract infections, which can cause discomfort during pregnancy, can be prevented by staying hydrated, maintaining hygiene and having a healthy diet

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With quotes from Dr Sailaja Devi K (obstetrician), Dr Sulthana Naseema Banu (gynecologist)

Urinary tract infections (UTIs) during pregnancy can be worrisome for new mothers, especially during the early period. Amidst the joy of her first pregnancy, Vasudha Venkatesh (27), a chartered accountant from Bengaluru, started to worry when she experienced a burning sensation during urination accompanied by pelvic pain.

Vasudha was six weeks pregnant when she learnt that she had an UTI. "I had just returned from a winter vacation and to my surprise, my delayed periods revealed that I was pregnant. I was experiencing a burning sensation while urinating. The doctor asked me to get some tests done, which showed I had an infection in the urinary tract," she said.

Vasudha, a new mom now, said that although she felt the urge to pee, she couldn't do so during her first trimester as she had an UTI. "I had pain in the pelvic area, which got me worried. Although I was given antibiotics for the UTI, I was informed that they should not be used for a long period during early pregnancy. Hence, I was directed to increase my water and fluid intake," she said.

UTIs during pregnancy: Are they dangerous?

UTIs do not cause any harm or danger to the growing baby in any of the three trimesters, says Dr Sailaja Devi K, consultant obstetrician, Fernandez Hospital, Hyderabad. "Out of 100 pregnant women, around eight get UTIs. Most of them are asymptomatic, and the infection is detected through a routine urine test. With the right medication, the infection can be controlled. If left untreated, the recurrent UTIs may spread to the kidneys and lead to pre-term labour, affecting the newborn's weight," she adds.

While UTIs can occur in any trimester, they are more common in the second and third trimesters, says Dr Sulthana Naseema Banu, consultant obstetrician, gynecologist and laparoscopic surgeon, Motherhood Hospitals, Chennai. "Pregnant women need to be vigilant about UTIs and seek appropriate medical attention if they suspect an infection," she adds.

UTI symptoms during pregnancy

Some pregnant women may experience several symptoms, while others may not experience all of them, says Dr Banu, listing out the main symptoms of UTIs:

- Frequent urge to urinate
- Pain or burning sensation during urination
- Cloudy or bloody urine
- Strong-smelling urine
- Pelvic pain or discomfort
- Fever or chills (in more severe cases)

What causes UTIs during pregnancy?

Pregnancy can increase the risk of developing UTIs due to hormonal changes, urinary retention and the physical pressure exerted on the bladder by the growing uterus, says Dr Banu.

She explains the six main causes of UTIs during pregnancy:

- **Hormonal changes:** Pregnancy hormones (such as progesterone) can cause changes in the urinary tract. These changes can lead to relaxation of the muscles in the ureters and bladder, resulting in reduced urine flow and decreased bladder emptying. Stagnant urine provides a favourable environment for bacteria to multiply, increasing the risk of infection.
- **Urinary retention:** As the uterus expands during pregnancy, it can put pressure on the bladder, leading to incomplete emptying and urinary retention. This creates an environment where bacteria can grow, increasing the likelihood of UTIs.
- **Increased blood flow:** During pregnancy, there is an increased blood flow to the kidneys, which can affect the filtration and excretion of urine. This alteration in kidney function can contribute to a higher susceptibility to UTIs.
- **Changes in urinary tract anatomy:** The anatomical changes that occur during pregnancy (like the enlargement of the uterus) can cause mechanical compression of the ureters. This compression can lead to urine reflux, where urine flows back into the kidneys, increasing the risk of infection.
- **Weakened immune system:** The immune system undergoes changes during pregnancy to protect the growing fetus, which can result in a slightly suppressed immune response. This reduced immune function may make pregnant women more susceptible to infections, including UTIs.
- **Changes in vaginal microbiota:** Hormonal fluctuations during pregnancy can also affect the vaginal environment. The increase in estrogen levels can cause changes in the vaginal pH and alter the balance of bacteria, making it easier for them to enter the urethra and cause infections.

How to treat UTIs during pregnancy?

A pregnant woman with UTI symptoms is asked to increase the water and fluid intake, says Dr Devi. "We prescribe medicines based on the urine culture test reports. If she has a fever and other mild symptoms of an UTI, we immediately put her on antibiotics that are safe during pregnancy," she adds.

Dr Banu says that while the medication should not affect the baby under usual circumstances, it is always advised to consult a doctor before taking any type of medication during pregnancy.

Takeaways

- UTIs during pregnancy are common and do not affect the growing baby. However, immediate attention and the right treatment are vital.
- Infections can be caused by several factors during pregnancy, which include hormonal changes, weakened immune system and urinary retention.
- UTIs can be treated by increasing water and fluid intake as well as taking antibiotics that are safe during pregnancy.

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