

# HAVE A SAFE PREGNANCY

Seven tips to help you  
sail through those  
nine months

BY CHARU BAHRI

**A**rchana Raha, senior vice president of a head-hunting firm in Thane, Maharashtra, continued working until a few days before she delivered her baby, a considerable feat given that her little one came 20 days earlier than expected. Of her delivery, she says, "I was in and out of the delivery room in two hours flat. I quickly lost the 10 kilos I had put on during my pregnancy. Three months later, I was back to wearing my size 26 jeans."

Can every pregnant woman's child-bearing experience be as smooth? Archana credits her easy pregnancy and delivery to her disciplined dietary and exercise habits and her caring gynaecologist, saying, "My doctor was almost like a mother to me; she made appropriate suggestions but did not lay down too many dos and don'ts."

Internationally certified childbirth and lactation educator Sonali Shivlani agrees with Archana wholeheartedly. Shivlani, also



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executive director of the Indian chapter of the Childbirth and Postpartum Professional Association (CAPPA India), an organization that trains and certifies educators to work with pregnant couples, sees birthing as a test of the physical endurance levels of a mother-to-be. According to her, "Women who eat right during their pregnancy withstand labour better. Their postnatal recovery is smoother and they bounce back to normal life quicker. Exercise helps too. Mums-to-be who exercise experience fewer aches and pains, have a faster delivery (thanks to their toned muscles) and shed their excess weight faster than those who don't exercise."

Knowing what to do and what not to do goes a long way in ensuring a mum-to-be enjoys the experience.

### 1. Have regular check-ups

Regular antenatal check-ups are essential for a safe pregnancy. The early detection of complications is the key to their management. Dr Indu Bala Khatri, consultant in obstetrics and gynaecology at Moolchand Women's Hospital, New Delhi, advises pregnant women to visit their obstetrician once a month during their first trimester and once every three weeks during their second trimester. "Subsequently, to be on the safe side, visit your doctor every fortnight during the seventh and eighth months and weekly in your last month," she adds. However, do not delay consulting your doctor if you experience any of these symptoms: pain or swelling in the calf,

chest pain, vaginal bleeding, difficulty in breathing even without exerting yourself, dizziness, persistent headaches, leakage of amniotic fluid, muscle weakness, reduced foetal movement or abdominal pain.

### 2. Eat well

"Pregnant women should not eat for two," opines noted Mumbai gynaecologist Dr Chittaranjan N Purandare. That is possibly the most widely prevailing myth about what constitutes an appropriate diet for mums-to-be. He recommends you stick to your normal diet. "Don't add rich foods to your diet as you'll find it difficult to get rid of the excess weight later on. Avoid roadside food. Having it is asking for trouble," he cautions.

"Pregnancy is not the time to experiment with diets. Eat a balanced diet. Focus on whole foods (fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes and low-fat milk) instead of processed and packaged foods. And as most women cannot depend on their diet alone for the extra nutrients they need, don't forget to take the supplements your doctor prescribes," advises Vidya Rao, head of the dietary department at Fortis Hospital, Bangalore. Rao also suggests that you:

**Watch your caffeine intake:** Two cups of coffee a day may slightly increase the risk of miscarriage while those who drink eight cups a day increase this risk considerably. This is because caffeine causes blood vessels to narrow which can reduce blood flow to the baby. Coffee also contains compounds called

phenols that hinder the absorption of iron, which is vital for the baby's growth. **Avoid these foods:** Raw meat, raw eggs, edibles containing raw eggs (such as mayonnaise), soft cheese, fish and milk that has not been pasteurized are best avoided because they may be contaminated with bacteria or in the case of fish, with mercury or industrial pollutants. Alcohol, and Chinese food that contains monosodium glutamate (MSG, also known as ajinomoto) are also best avoided. Wash raw veggies and fruits thoroughly. Also, avoid high-fat and sugary foods, artificial sweeteners, and salted snacks.

**Get sufficient fatty acids:** Omega-3 fatty acids, a kind of good fat, are essential for the development of the baby's brain and vision and for a child's overall health as it grows. It has also been shown to reduce pregnancy-related complications. Some dietary sources of these essential fatty acids are flaxseeds, flaxseed oil, soyabeans, soyabean oil, walnuts and olive oil.

**Drink milk:** Drink three to four glasses of low-fat milk every day. Calcium helps prevent pregnancy-induced high blood pressure and is important for the normal functioning of your nerves and muscles. Getting sufficient calcium is essential if you plan to nurse your little one.

### 3. Don't miss your daily supplements

Supplements for pregnant women include folic acid for the development of the baby's spinal cord and nervous



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system. "Folic acid is a vital nutrient and women who are planning to conceive are advised to start taking it early, prior to getting pregnant. The prescribed dose is 5 milligrams a day during the pre-pregnancy period and in the first trimester," advises Dr Khatri. Iron is also essential for the development of the baby. Mothers-to-be are prescribed a daily dose of 60 milligrams of elemental iron. Calcium is a vital mineral too. Mums-to-be should take 1000 milligrams of calcium in their second and third trimesters and throughout lactation. Docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) is important as well. This essential nutrient helps build your baby's brain, nervous system, and eyes.

#### 4. Don't self-medicate

Dr Purandare suggests that you consult your doctor if you fall ill, because pregnant women can't take just any medication. "There are prescribed medications even for common ailments like heartburn, indigestion, aches and pains, allergies, cold and cough and stomach problems. These medicines have been proven safe—that is, they do not cross the placenta and harm the baby," he explains. And if you have a chronic condition requiring daily or weekly medication, check with your doctor as soon as you find out that you are pregnant.

It also makes sense to try some gentle home remedies before you think of medication. For instance, try drinking more fluids and eating more fibre if you suffer from constipation. A head massage could help relieve a headache. Kumud Sharma, CEO of Superseva Services, a personal assistance company in Bangalore, supports alternative therapies over medication, saying, "Tulsi tea was my saviour whenever I caught a cold or developed a cough during my pregnancy. I stayed away from medication altogether."

#### 5. Exercise right

According to Dr Khatri, "Women are advised exercises like *pranayam*, walking, and swimming that may comfortably be performed during pregnancy (even in the first trimester). It is okay to do light exercises that you're used to. For the most part, bed rest has no role in a normal healthy pregnancy. But women

shouldn't perform strenuous exercises, or visit gyms or jog during pregnancy."

Dr Purandare suggests learning breathing and antenatal exercises from specialized physiotherapists from the seventh month onwards. In addition, he recommends walking in moderation (up to 30 minutes) during the second and third trimesters to keep your body mobile. And stay cool when you exercise. Wear loose clothes that allow you to breathe deeply and drink plenty of water before and after you exercise to avoid dehydration.

Archana, a yoga aficionado since her teens, continued with yoga and long walks during her pregnancy, though she took care to avoid *asanas* (postures) that strain the abdomen. [See 'Yoga for You' on page 18.] "I led an active life and used to walk for half an hour every morning and evening. And I was advised to use an Indian-style toilet as opposed to a western one, as this helps stretch the thigh muscles."

Dr Khatri says that squatting is often prescribed as exercise during the last month of pregnancy. "If you're used to it, it is okay to continue in the third trimester. But women who are not accustomed to sitting on the floor may find it difficult to squat with a large tummy and should best avoid this position," she adds. Women who develop complications during their pregnancy should be careful about exercise. Consult your doctor before exercising, especially if you have been told that you have a high-risk pregnancy.

#### AND REMEMBER ...

- Plan ahead. Don't schedule a job or house change during your pregnancy. Also, don't have your home painted during that period. Besides creating additional work for you, you may find the odour of paint nauseating and it might even harm your baby.
- Be careful when climbing stairs.
- Avoid smoking and drinking alcohol during pregnancy. They reduce blood flow to the baby and can retard its

growth or cause an abortion. Second-hand smoke, too, poses almost the same dangers and should be avoided.

- Any kind of X-ray or scan must be done only on your gynaecologist's recommendation.
- Wear a seat belt when you travel by car.
- If you work, don't stand on your feet all day. Sit down as often as is possible. Prolonged standing may cause problems.

#### 6. Educate yourself

Kumud feels that the best a to-be-mum can do is to educate herself. "You learn useful tips about every stage of your pregnancy that you can relate to. I used to read a newsletter for expecting families and share the information with my husband. That really helped us bond during what is a different phase of a couple's togetherness," she recalls.

Chennai-based childbirth educator Deepa Santhosh believes that being well informed and mentally prepared is the key to an enjoyable and safe pregnancy and most important of all, a healthy mother and baby. Santhosh holds classes on pregnancy and delivery and quite literally, hand-holds first-time parents through the nine months. She encourages fathers-to-be to take part in programs offering useful information for each stage of pregnancy. "That increases their confidence in caring for their pregnant wives and they are more supportive during childbirth. Their

participation helps a woman experience the joy of giving birth as a family," she opines.

#### 7. Keep stress at bay

Stress causes blood pressure to rise and that can have a dangerous effect on both the mothers as well as the baby's health. Archana recalls her doctor telling her to get sufficient rest and to stay in the company of positive people during her pregnancy. According to her, "Good books, soothing music, and being surrounded by loved ones are great ways to stay calm. Learning relaxation techniques such as visualization and meditation could help too. Spend 20 minutes a day breathing slowly and deeply. And don't worry about labour pains. Pain-killers can take care of that. Last, but not the least, don't obsess about your weight. If you follow doctors' recommendations, you will not gain more than what is essential."