

Pregnancy and the Older Woman

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WHAT IS IT THEY SAY? 30 IS THE NEW 20. 40 IS THE NEW 30.

IT MAY WORK WHEN IT COMES TO FASHION AND ATTITUDE, BUT NUMBERS DON'T LIE WHEN IT COMES TO AGE AND FERTILITY.

Decreasing Fertility

As women, we are born with all the eggs (or potential babies) that we are ever going to have. Unlike men – who reproduce sperm every 75-90 days – women are constantly losing their egg supply. On average, fertility rates begin to decline at 32 and make an even steeper decline once women reach the age of 37.

Some of this is attributed to the loss of eggs, some to increased chromosomal abnormalities (the longer the eggs sit around the more likely there is that something is wrong with them), as well as increase in irregular (non-egg releasing) cycles.





Older Mothers Are More Common (and More Joyful)

In the year 2000, only 8% of birthing people were over the age of 35. As of 2018, that number has risen to 18% - a significant increase. If you're over 35 and pregnant, or thinking about becoming pregnant, you are not alone.

This increase in births to women ages 35-45 has many causes, as women delay marriage, have second marriages, use better birth control options and have greater opportunities for advanced education and careers.

While there are medical reasons why having a child over the age of 35 may present increased risks, there are social and economic reasons why older first-time mothers may find some successes and benefits.

Those benefits may include:

- A more stable career--and more resilient financial resources as a result.
- Older parents may have a better sense of who they are and, as a result, how they'd like to parent.
- Patients over the age of 35 may already have a good relationship with their OBGYN and have a better sense of their medical priorities.
- Older mothers may have a more resilient support network, including family and friends.

IF YOU'RE AN EXPECTANT MOTHER AND YOU'RE OVER THE AGE OF 35,
THERE ARE PLENTY OF REASONS TO BE JOYFUL.



Increased Risk of Complications

It is also true that as women age, they are at a greater risk for medical conditions that can further compromise pregnancy and fertility. Hypertension, diabetes, cancer, obesity, pelvic infections, fibroids and endometriosis can all have untoward effects such as increasing the rates of miscarriage and infertility as well as complicating any pregnancies that do occur.

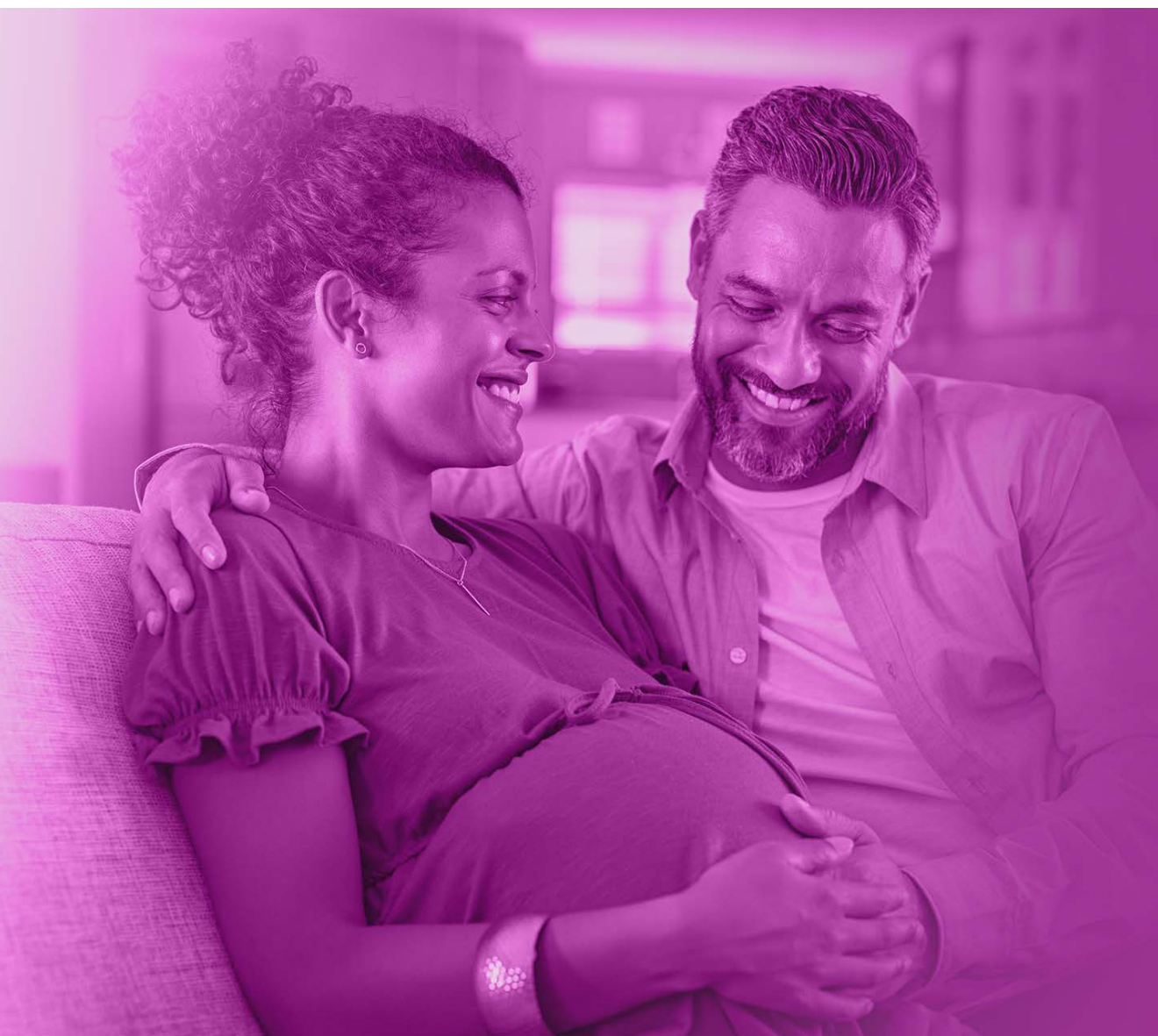
Once “older women” do become pregnant, they are at an increased risk of miscarriage as

chromosomal abnormalities are the number one cause of miscarriage. Risk of miscarriage for those under age 30 is 12% and rates jump to 25% for those 35-39.

Risk of babies born with chromosomal or congenital abnormalities also increases with age. The risk of having a baby born with Down syndrome is 1/1,477 at age 20 and 1/85 at age 40. While all women are offered the opportunity for genetic screening, women of “advanced

maternal age” (those ladies over the age of 35) have additional screening tests that are available, given their increased risk.

Medical problems like hypertension and diabetes can further complicate pregnancies and increase risk of preterm delivery and C-section birth. Older women also have a higher rate of twins.



Understanding Your Risks

There was a time when pregnancy over the age of 35 was considered an automatic, high-risk pregnancy. That's no longer always the case, as physicians and researchers have discovered that there's much more nuance when it comes to age and complications.

That said, it does become harder to successfully conceive and carry a baby to term as you grow older.

The chances of a miscarriage, for example, break down like this:

- Mothers between the ages of 20-30: 17%
- Mothers around the age of 35: 20%
- Mothers around the age of 40: 40%
- Mothers around the age of 50: 80%

Miscarriages are often underreported, which means that the actual numbers could be somewhat larger. But the ratios make clear that the risk of miscarriage is clearly connected to your age. That said, it's important to keep in mind that these are not certainties--only possibilities. The odds of successful pregnancy in older women is still quite high. For most, a healthy mother will lead to a healthy pregnancy.

Can You Minimize Your Risks?

Because older mothers are becoming more common, the associated risks are becoming more well known. As a result, many prospective or expectant mothers want to know what they can do to help minimize complications with pregnancy in older women. Some of those strategies include:

Some of those strategies include:

- Eating in a way that's healthy: Keeping your body in good health is a great way to help increase the odds of a successful pregnancy in older women. So make sure you're getting plenty of fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and so on. Talk to your primary care doctor about what a healthy diet looks like for you. Your OBGYN may also recommend vitamin supplements.
- Talk about weight with your healthcare provider: This conversation doesn't always revolve around losing weight. In fact, many prospective mothers may benefit from gaining a small amount of weight for a more successful pregnancy.
- Avoid tobacco products: If you don't smoke, your chances of a healthy delivery will be much improved. Your primary care physician or OBGYN can help recommend therapies that will help you quit.
- Get prenatal care and screenings: There are many prenatal diagnostics and screenings that can help determine your baby's risk for certain genetic abnormalities. Likewise, prenatal care can help you stay healthy throughout your pregnancy.



What Does Your Pregnancy Look Like?

This is a lot of information to digest and understand! Many women will simply want to know: what does a pregnancy over 35 look like? What can I expect from my pregnancy? For most women, a pregnancy over 35 will be very similar to any other pregnancy: the duration will require something like 9 or 10 months. There will likely be morning sickness early on and back pain (among other pains) later in the process.

But there may be some differences you'll experience:

- You will likely undergo more screenings and tests. This can range from various genetic screenings to additional testing for gestational diabetes or high blood pressure.
- It might be harder to conceive and carry your baby to term. That is, you may have to make more attempts. In some cases, you may be referred to a fertility specialist.
- You're more likely to have twins or triplets. This has to do with how your eggs are released from your ovaries as you grow older.
- It's more likely that you'll need to deliver via C-Section. Again, the vast majority of women over 35 deliver vaginally—but the chances you might require surgical intervention will increase. As a result, your birth plan may cover more of these possible contingencies.

For the vast majority of women, pregnancy over 35 will look remarkably similar to pregnancy at 25 (though, your back may hurt more). And the vast majority of the time, the end result is a happy and healthy baby!

Still, it's understandable that you might be concerned about increased risks and additional tests. Talk to your OBGYN about what your individual pregnancy might look like--and what you can expect.

Talk to Your OBGYN

Pregnancy and older women can be complicated. But the good news is that although the risks are higher, the majority of these pregnancies still end with happy, healthy babies and mothers.

It is important to see your doctor if you are over the age of 35 and have not achieved a pregnancy within 6 months. And no matter your age, if you have pre-existing medical problems such as hypertension, diabetes or obesity that may complicate a future pregnancy, you should always see your obstetrician for pre-conceptual counseling.



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