



PREGNANCY

Pressure Point

ALTHOUGH STILL RARE, STROKES ARE ON THE RISE DURING AND AFTER PREGNANCY. HERE'S WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

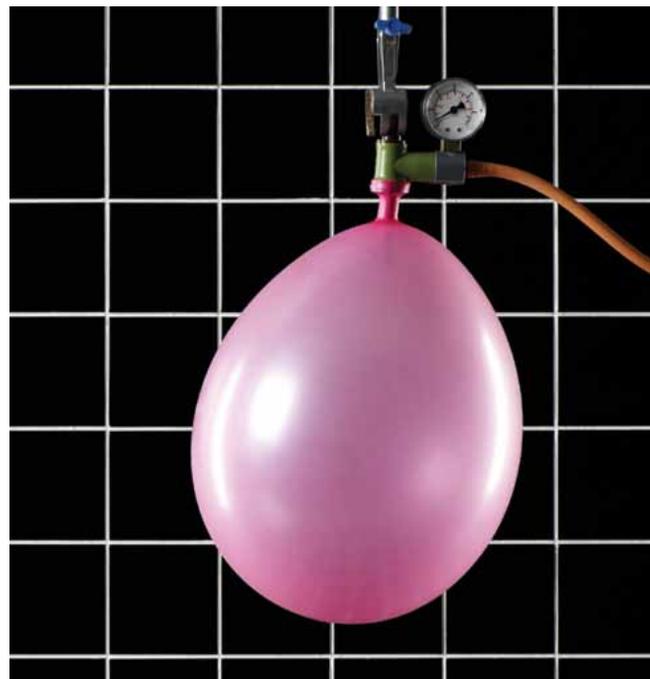
By Michele Cohen Marill

You may not often think about strokes, especially when you're pregnant. But strokes during pregnancy or after childbirth have increased steadily for the past two decades, even while they are declining among older people. Doctors aren't sure why, but they point to trends that lead to higher risk: Women are waiting to have children until they are older, and they are increasingly likely to be overweight or obese.

About one in 12 women develops high blood pressure during pregnancy, which raises the risk of having a stroke. And while stroke remains rare, affecting up to 34 in 100,000 pregnancies, it can be devastating.

Stroke occurs when the blood flow is cut off to part of the brain, because of either a damaged blood vessel or a blood clot. Certain changes during pregnancy make these blood vessel problems more likely, especially if you have high blood pressure, a heart disorder, or other serious medical condition such as diabetes, migraines, or kidney disease.

During pregnancy, the volume of blood in the body



increases, and women are at greater risk of developing a blood clot. After giving birth, a new mother's blood pressure often rises. For most women, this is not a serious concern but for some, blood pressure spikes high enough to cause a stroke. About a third of pregnancy-related strokes happen after childbirth.

Preeclampsia during pregnancy is now more common, affecting one in 20 pregnancies. This blood pressure disorder, which can damage organs such as the kidneys and liver, often appears in the second trimester or later with one or

more of these telltale signs: high blood pressure, sudden weight gain, abdominal pain, swelling of the hands or face, changes in vision, and headaches.

Sometimes those symptoms feel like the normal sensations of pregnancy.

"Certainly a headache that is mild and goes away with Tylenol or rest is not likely to be a stroke," says Arun Jeyabalan, MD, associate professor in the obstetrics, gynecology, and reproductive sciences department at the University of Pittsburgh. "Anything that is more severe or prolonged warrants some attention."

How can you prevent stroke? Jeyabalan suggests starting healthy habits before you become pregnant: Manage your weight, exercise regularly, and eat well. Some women with high blood pressure take a low-dose aspirin pill every day during pregnancy, but you shouldn't take any medicines or supplements—beyond your prenatal vitamin—without asking your doctor first, she advises.

Also be aware of your pre-pregnancy blood pressure and be sure to tell your doctor if it rises.

ASK YOUR DOCTOR

1. What is my blood pressure?
2. Has it gone up during my pregnancy?
3. Am I at risk for preeclampsia?
4. Should I check my blood pressure at home? If so, how often?
5. Should I avoid any foods or over-the-counter medications because they can raise my blood pressure?
6. Would I benefit from taking a low-dose aspirin each day?
7. Should I measure my blood pressure after delivery and before my postpartum visit?

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