

Domestic Violence and Pregnancy

Domestic violence is any type of physical, sexual, or emotional harm done by a current or former partner. Emotional abuse includes threatening and controlling behavior. Stalking is an example of threatening behavior. This type of abuse can happen to anyone, at any time in a relationship. Domestic violence is also called intimate partner violence.

Intimate partner violence is especially dangerous during pregnancy because the abuse may affect both you and your developing baby. Call a domestic violence hotline or let your health care provider know if you are being physically or sexually abused, or if your partner's threatening or controlling behavior is making you feel unsafe. Getting help and support protects you, your pregnancy, and your baby.

How does this affect me?

For you, the negative effects of intimate partner violence can include:

- Physical injury or death (*homicide*).
- Emotional stress and fear.
- Trouble sleeping.
- Loss of appetite.
- Digestion problems.
- Frequent infections, including sexually transmitted infections.
- High blood pressure.
- Depression.
- Anxiety.
- Thoughts of hurting yourself or committing suicide.

Intimate partner violence may negatively affect your pregnancy in these ways:

- You are more likely to be injured or have poor health.
- You may be less likely to get prenatal care.
- You may not have good nutrition or gain a healthy amount of weight.
- You may be more likely to smoke, use drugs, and drink alcohol during pregnancy to relieve stress.
- You may be at higher risk of losing your pregnancy (*miscarriage* or *stillbirth*).
- Your baby may be born before 37 weeks of pregnancy (*premature*).

How does this affect my baby?

If you experience intimate partner violence during pregnancy:

- Your baby may be injured.
- Your baby may not survive pregnancy (*miscarriage* or *stillbirth*).
- Your baby may be born premature, which can cause mental and physical problems.
- Your baby may not grow well in your womb and may be born small (*small for gestational age*).
- If you use alcohol, your baby may be born with fetal alcohol syndrome, which can cause birth defects and other problems.
- You may have trouble bonding with your baby, which can lead to neglect.
- You may be less likely to breastfeed, which is the healthiest way to feed your baby.

Follow these instructions at home:

- Let your health care provider know that you are experiencing intimate partner violence.
- **Do not** bring an abusive partner with you to your prenatal visits. This will allow you to speak freely with your provider.
- Learn about and use resources on intimate partner violence, such as the National Domestic Violence Hotline: thehotline.org.
- Consider counseling.
- Consider getting a legal document that says your partner has to stay away from you (*restraining order*).
- Have a support person stay with you in your home.
- Have an escape plan to get to a safe place.
- **Do not** smoke, use drugs, or drink alcohol to relieve stress.
- Keep all your prenatal visits as told by your health care provider. This is important.



Where to find more information

- Futures Without Violence: futureswithoutviolence.org
- National Coalition Against Domestic Violence: ncadv.org
- National Network to End Domestic Violence: nnev.org
- National Resource Center on Domestic Violence: nrcdv.org
- The U.S. Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women: justice.gov/ovw

Contact a health care provider if:

- You experience any type of intimate partner violence at home.
- You need help to quit smoking, drinking, or taking drugs.

Get help right away if:

- You do not feel safe at home.
- You have thoughts of hurting yourself or committing suicide.

If you ever feel like you may hurt yourself or others, or have thoughts about taking your own life, get help right away. You can go to your nearest emergency department or call:

- **Your local emergency services (911 in the U.S.).**
- **A suicide crisis helpline, such as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255. This is open 24 hours a day.**

Summary

- Domestic violence is also called intimate partner violence. Intimate partner violence can be physical, sexual, or emotional.
- This type of abuse can happen to anyone at any time in a relationship, but the effects are especially dangerous during pregnancy.
- Intimate partner violence increases your baby's risk of miscarriage, stillbirth, and premature birth.
- Tell your health care provider if you experience any type of intimate partner violence. Get help right away if you do not feel safe at home.

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.

Document Released: 09/05/2018 Document Revised: 09/05/2018 Document Reviewed: 09/05/2018
Elsevier Interactive Patient Education © 2020 Elsevier Inc.