PREGNANCY

A Healthy Heart for Two: Essential Tips for Pregnancy and Cardiovascular Well-Being

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Pregnancy puts significant strain on the heart and circulatory system, making heart health a crucial aspect of prenatal care. Blood volume increases by 30-50%, and the heart must work harder to pump it efficiently. While most women with healthy hearts manage pregnancy well, those with preexisting conditions or lifestyle risks must be extra cautious. Below, we cover essential dos, don’ts, and some lesser-known yet vital recommendations for maintaining heart health during pregnancy.

Dos for a Healthy Heart During Pregnancy

1. Prioritize Regular Prenatal Checkups

Routine monitoring of blood pressure and heart rate can detect early signs of complications like preeclampsia or gestational hypertension. Some women may need a cardiologist’s evaluation, especially if they have preexisting conditions like high blood pressure or congenital heart disease.

2. Follow a Heart-Healthy Diet

A balanced diet rich in fiber, lean proteins, and healthy fats can prevent excessive weight gain and reduce stress on the heart. The Mediterranean diet—featuring nuts, fish, olive oil, and vegetables—is highly recommended for cardiovascular support.

3. Stay Active with Safe Exercises

Moderate exercise, such as walking, prenatal yoga, and swimming, improves circulation and reduces the risk of blood clots and high blood pressure. However, high-intensity workouts should be approached with caution, and always under medical supervision.

4. Manage Stress and Sleep Well

Pregnancy-related stress can elevate blood pressure, increasing cardiovascular risks. Meditation, deep breathing exercises, and proper sleep hygiene help regulate heart rate and overall well-being.

5. Stay Hydrated and Monitor Electrolyte Balance

Proper hydration keeps blood volume stable, reducing the risk of dizziness and palpitations. Electrolytes like potassium and magnesium also help maintain a steady heart rhythm.

Don’ts: Heart Health Risks to Avoid

1. Avoid Excessive Caffeine and Energy Drinks

While some caffeine (up to 200 mg per day) is generally safe, excessive consumption can elevate blood pressure and cause irregular heartbeats.

2. Say No to Smoking and Alcohol

Both substances can increase the risk of preeclampsia, preterm birth, and heart-related complications. Quitting smoking improves both maternal and fetal heart health significantly.

3. Don’t Ignore Symptoms of Heart Issues

Shortness of breath, chest pain, dizziness, or excessive swelling should never be ignored. These could be signs of peripartum cardiomyopathy, a serious heart condition that develops during or after pregnancy.

4. Avoid High-Sodium and Processed Foods

Excess salt can lead to water retention and high blood pressure. Limiting processed foods and opting for fresh, whole ingredients can prevent cardiovascular stress.

5. Refrain from Over-the-Counter Medications Without Doctor Approval

Some common pain relievers, decongestants, and herbal supplements can raise blood pressure or affect circulation, potentially harming both mother and baby.

Lesser-Known but Crucial Heart Health Recommendations

1. Get Screened for Iron and Vitamin D Deficiencies

Iron deficiency can lead to anemia, increasing heart strain, while vitamin D deficiency is linked to high blood pressure. Regular screening ensures these levels remain optimal.

2. Consider Low-Dose Aspirin for High-Risk Pregnancies

Recent guidelines suggest that women at risk for preeclampsia (e.g., those with hypertension, obesity, or diabetes) may benefit from low-dose aspirin, which improves blood flow and reduces clot risks.

3. Monitor Thyroid Function

Thyroid disorders can cause arrhythmias and other heart issues, yet routine testing is often overlooked. Pregnant women should ensure their thyroid hormones are balanced.

4. Be Aware of Postpartum Cardiovascular Risks

Heart risks don’t end after delivery. Conditions like postpartum cardiomyopathy can develop weeks after birth, requiring continued monitoring and care.

5. Maintain Good Oral Health

Gum disease has been linked to heart disease, and pregnancy hormones can worsen oral health issues. Regular dental checkups reduce inflammation and the risk of cardiovascular complications.

Final Thoughts

Heart health is often overshadowed by other prenatal concerns, yet it plays a fundamental role in both maternal and fetal well-being. Following these dos and don’ts, along with the lesser-known recommendations, can significantly reduce cardiovascular risks during pregnancy. Always consult a healthcare provider for personalized advice, and never ignore warning signs—your heart and your baby’s health depend on it.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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