

Description

Salutary Factors to Support a Healthy Pregnancy

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Introduction

There is a window of opportunity during pregnancy to share health messages as women and birthing people are usually receptive. A salutogenic approach to health promotion[1] can enhance the provision of woman-centred care instead of focusing on individual 'risk' status. Salutogenesis views health as a spectrum with individuals moving towards health and ill-health throughout life.[1] The model recognises that all individuals may benefit from salutary factors that promote health,[2] therefore, this approach can support a healthy pregnancy.

Diet

The importance of a well-balanced diet cannot be ignored. The role of the human microbiome in health and prevention of disease is beginning to be understood.[3] A dysfunctional microbiome in adults can be associated with irritable bowel syndrome and depression.[3] The latter is of particular importance during pregnancy, with one in five women affected by perinatal mental health problems.[4]

It has been identified that dietary changes can modify the human microbiome and that a balanced diet may prevent disease.[5] Supplementation of folic acid pre-conception and in early pregnancy prevents the occurrence of neural tube defects,[6] whereas vitamin D during pregnancy may reduce the risk of gestational diabetes.[7]

A diet lacking unprocessed plant foods reduces the availability of vitamins, minerals and other nutrients that are essential to health and can further disrupt the human microbiome.[8]

Exercise

Exercise has been shown to positively influence the microbiome and may lower inflammatory and oxidative stress.[9] Furthermore, exercise in pregnancy is linked to improved mood states and sleep[10] alongside other benefits (Table 1). Outdoor activities such as going for a walk and connecting with nature may support an individual's emotional and psychological wellbeing and should be encouraged.

Table 1 Benefits of exercise in pregnancy[11]

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Lower incidence of	Higher incidence of
Excessive weight gain	Vaginal birth
Gestational diabetes mellitus	
Gestational hypertension or pre-eclampsia	
Preterm birth	
Caesarean birth	
Low birthweight	

Skincare

Striae gravidarum (stretch marks) are one of the most common skin disorders of pregnancy and can have a negative impact on a woman or birthing person's emotional wellbeing.[12] Daily self-massage for the prevention of striae gravidarum and to maintain skin resilience may prove beneficial. This daily practice can encourage parents to connect with their baby during pregnancy, and talking to their growing baby should be encouraged as well as noticing and responding to movements.[13]

If planning a vaginal birth, conversations around perineal massage (PM) are beneficial as it has been identified that the likelihood of perineal trauma (mainly episiotomies) is reduced.[14] From 34 weeks of pregnancy, PM just once or twice a week for 10 minutes has shown to be effective.[15]

Having conversations with women and birthing people about salutary factors such as healthy eating, exercise and skincare could prove transformative and may improve their experience of pregnancy and childbirth. Furthermore, these factors may promote the health of an individual without putting an emphasis on their 'risk' status. **TPM**

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