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## **CHRONIC MEDICAL DISEASES IN PREGNANCY**

Pregnancy is the most vulnerable phase of a women's life. This phase also constitutes a special risk group. During pregnancy, a woman needs good nutrition in order to give birth to a healthy baby. Women who have poor nutritional status at the time of conception are at higher risk of disease and death; their health depends greatly on the availability of food, and they may be unable to cope with their increased nutrient needs during pregnancy in situations of food insecurity. Infections such as malaria, HIV and infestation with gastrointestinal parasites can further deteriorate the women's nutritional status.

Women in India suffer from three major problems that affect their health during pregnancy. These are malnutrition, infections and unregulated fertility.

Some chronic medical disorders:-

1. Diabetes Mellitus – Pregnant women who have high blood sugar levels during the first trimester of pregnancy should be considered to have diabetes mellitus and not gestational diabetes. Their glycosylated haemoglobin should be checked to get their sugar levels of the past three months. These women are at greater risk of foetal malformations,

especially neural tube defects, which increase by 8-23%, depending on the sugar level. The mother has an increased risk of abortions, infection during pregnancy.

2. **Chronic Hypertension-** Hypertension may worsen the foetal and maternal prognosis. It may worsen the chances of preterm birth, IUGR (Intrauterine Growth Restriction), abortion, and prenatal mortality.
3. **Hypothyroidism-** There is an increase in thyroid disorders these days, especially hypothyroidism. Hypothyroidism can be first-time diagnosis in pregnancy. Untreated hypothyroidism in early pregnancy can lead to abortion and foetal wastage. Hypothyroidism is also an important factor in deficient intellectual development in a child.

#### **Miscellaneous Factors:**

- A. **Alcohol** – In women who consume alcohol, there is an increased risk of foetal growth restriction, facial malformations, and mental retardation. There can be lifelong learning difficulties and short attention spans, that is, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Alcohol decreases the blood flow, and hence nutrients and oxygen supply to the developing foetus. In extreme cases, consumption of alcohol can lead to Foetal Alcohol Syndrome, which is characterised by foetal growth restriction, facial abnormalities and central nervous system dysfunction.
- B. **Smoking** – Smoking reduces blood flow to the growing foetus, and therefore decreases oxygen supply and nutrient supply. Smokers are at greater risk of spontaneous abortions and foetal growth restriction. They are also at greater risk of PIH (Pregnancy induced hypertension).
- C. **Caffeine** – High intake of caffeine increases the risk of spontaneous abortions and foetal growth restriction. There can be a decrease in the placental blood flow, and hence deficient absorption of certain nutrients such as calcium, iron and zinc.
- D. **Drugs** – During pregnancy, drugs should only be taken under medical supervision. Any drug can cause problems during pregnancy by crossing the placental barrier and causing a decrease in the blood flow to the foetus, and hence the uptake of oxygen by the foetus.

- E. Domestic violence/abuse – This should be carefully ruled out in women. Women belonging to the lower socio-economic strata of society are at greater risk. Sometimes family pressures create tremendous pressure on women, and hence on her developing foetus. The chances of PIH, growth restriction and LBW increase in these women.**
- F. Nutritional supplements- Nutritional supplements should also be taken under supervision, for example, high doses of vitamin A can cause severe birth defects and even abnormalities of the cardiovascular system and the nervous system.**

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