

Older Moms Face Special Risks

Women are giving birth at increasing ages. As your 30s slip away, problems can arise during pregnancy for you and your child.

WITH THEIR BIOLOGICAL CLOCKS

TICKING, more U.S. women have been taking the time to make a career before making babies. Are you one of them?

If you're younger, perhaps you want to delay motherhood. If you're older, maybe you finally feel ready for a family.

You're not alone. Childbirth demographics in this country are changing:

- The average age of U.S. women who give birth for the first time has been increasing for decades. From 1970 to 2006, it rose 3.6 years, from age 21.4 to 25.
- Women 35 and older accounted for one out of 12 first births in 2006 compared to one out of 100 in 1970.
- Between 1980 and 2004, the number of women ages 40 and older who gave birth for the first time increased 15-fold.

A Boost from Technology

Around menopause (the late 40s or early 50s), your chances of conceiving are low. But it's now possible for women to wait until they're close to or even at menopause to have kids using assisted reproductive technology (ART).

ART usually involves surgically removing eggs from one woman, merging them with sperm in a lab, and inserting them into the same woman or a different woman. Someday, women may be able to store

frozen eggs so they can conceive their own biological offspring years later.

Nevertheless, pregnancy and childbirth are safest between ages 25 and 35. It's when you reach your 40s and beyond—with or without ART—that you and your baby can expect increased health risks.

Key Risks with Age

The pregnancy of an older woman—even if she uses a younger woman's eggs—may be threatened by her existing age-related health issues, such as chronic high blood pressure, diabetes, or a history of cancer. Then there's the high blood pressure that develops in ART pregnancies. Up to 35 percent of ART patients ages 50 and older have pregnancy-induced hypertension.

Even without ART, pregnant women 40 and older are twice as likely as younger women to struggle with high blood pressure. This condition can restrict the unborn baby's growth and lead to premature delivery.

Two key concerns for pregnant women in their 40s are caesarean section delivery and prolonged or troubled labor. A caesarean section raises risks for infant mortality and problems with the placenta in future pregnancies.



Other Possible Problems

Other problems are more likely among older moms:

- Preterm births. Births of less than 37 weeks of gestation shot up 20 percent among all U.S. women from 1990 to 2006. Those most at risk are those younger than 20 and 40 or older. Preterm babies aren't fully developed. As a result, they suffer health problems and a higher chance of death than full-term babies.
- Miscarriage, when pregnancy spontaneously ends before its 20th week.
- Chromosomal abnormalities, such as Down syndrome.
- Stillbirth. Though such deaths of the unborn child at or after the 20th week are uncommon, the chances rise with the mother's age.

Your own risks of dying from pregnancy or childbirth also climb with age, but this is rare.

The Generation Gap

If you're healthy, most likely you and your baby will never experience any of these physical risks. But you may also want to consider how the decades in age between you and your child could impact you both.

For instance, how do you envision life when your son or daughter hits adolescence while you're about to retire? Just as they're ready to strike out on their own, they might

have to cope with the health problems that could accompany your older years. And you may be faced with the cost of college when you're near retirement.

Then again, giving birth when you're older means you're that much more mature, stable in your career, and financially secure.

No matter what your age, having a baby is a huge decision. However, as you get older, the questions and concerns take on greater import. Thousands of women in their 40s and up don't let the challenges stop them. If their numbers include you, then you know that motherhood is worth the wait. •

—*Claire Sykes*

Steps to a Healthy Pregnancy

No matter what your age, it's important to take care of yourself before you conceive and while you're carrying. For women ages 35 and older, the American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (www.acog.org) suggests the following:

- Talk with your doctor and get the facts.
- Ask about the pros and cons of genetic counseling.
- Eat healthy foods.
- Lose pounds if you're overweight.
- Take a vitamin that contains a folic acid supplement (such as a prenatal vitamin).
- Exercise regularly.
- Say no to cigarettes, alcohol, and nonprescribed drugs.
- Reduce stress.
- Get plenty of sleep.
- Keep your immunizations up-to-date.

