

Script – Print – The Dangers of Chronic High Blood Pressure and Pregnancy

Taking care of yourself before, during and after a pregnancy has always been important. That's further illustrated by a recent [study](#) in the journal *Hypertension* that reveals a rise in the number of women with chronic high blood pressure who are dying during and after pregnancy.

The study examined 155 million births in the United States between 1979 and 2018, and found 3,287 mothers died of high blood pressure-related causes. The study revealed that about a third of maternal deaths occurred before delivery; a third on the day of delivery or within a week, and a third occurred one week to a year after delivery. Researchers estimate that 75% of the deaths were preventable.

“I think there are a lot of factors that play into that and recently as the American population becomes unhealthier, the chronic medical conditions are going to play into that as well and that includes things like diabetes, high blood pressure, and specifically, obesity,” says Dr. Jamie Plett, an OB/GYN at OSF HealthCare. “All those things will tie into higher risks for mom and baby as well. I just think in general as American health is becoming worse overall and it's affecting pregnant moms, too.”

The risk of blood pressure-related complications increased with age, and the risk was especially high among Black women. According to the study, Black women had three to four times the risk of dying from blood pressure-related issues compared to white women. It's a concern, says Dr. Plett, which extends beyond pregnancy issues.

“That happens frequently because there are a lot of different things that play into health care in the United States, whether that's insurance coverage, the ability to access health care or because of prolonged limited access to health care that also increases chronic medical conditions in those women,” says Dr. Plett. “Studies have proven over and over again that maternal morbidity rates are higher and chronic health problems are higher in Black women and other women of color.”

High blood pressure presents various risks during pregnancy including premature delivery, future cardiovascular disease and decreased blood flow to the placenta, which could lead to other complications for the baby.

“One of the things we worry about is something called intrauterine growth restriction or is the baby getting enough blood flow to grow like they should, so that's one of the things to keep an eye on with every pregnant woman,” says Dr. Plett.

There is good news, however. Chronic high blood pressure can be prevented, according to Dr. Plett, especially through diet and exercise. It is recommended that pregnant women continue to get 30 minutes of exercise three to four times a week.

Pregnant women typically have their blood pressure checked during every wellness visit, too. Having a blood pressure cuff at home is fine, but not necessary unless you suspect a problem. Elevated blood pressure is a systolic pressure of 120 and a diastolic pressure below 80. Stage 2

hypertension is 140 over 90. Your doctor may prescribe a blood pressure medication that is safe for both mom and baby.

“Get treated as best as you can before pregnancy,” adds Dr. Plett. “If you find out that you have chronic hypertension early in the pregnancy be vigilant in doing the exercise and dietary changes that you can control, take medicine as you need to and then we’ll monitor you more closely. And know that you’re a higher risk for some things, but some things can be prevented.”

For more information on pregnancy and birth, visit [OSF HealthCare](#).