



Travelling while Pregnant

is it worth the risk?



I'm pregnant!

Many thoughts may go through your mind when you confirm that indeed you definitely are pregnant. If you have an overseas trip planned then this adds another level of complexity to your emotions! Is it safe to travel? Are you taking unnecessary risks? Are there extra precautions which can be taken to make it safe? What about the malaria prophylactic drugs? Are they safe? Obviously, every pregnancy is different but there are some guidelines which are worth considering as you consider whether or not to travel at this time.

First pregnancy;

If this is your first pregnancy they you need to realise that you are travelling into uncharted territory - a path you have never been down before. The chances are that the pregnancy will progress easily with no serious difficulty - after all pregnancy is a normal physiological event not a pathological condition! Nevertheless travelling abroad during the first pregnancy may expose you and your unborn child to certain very significant risks which might not be too serious at home. All you can say is that a normal pregnancy is a completed pregnancy. Up to that final point when everything has run smoothly there can be no certainty.

Business travel while pregnant

This is a difficult situation as frequently your schedule of international trips may have been planned many months ahead of time and you have commitments. At a very early stage of the pregnancy you don't usually want to have to tell your boss that you are pregnant and yet an important meeting has been organised which involves you flying half way around the world! This requires quite a number of decisions which need to be made - often very quickly. However at the end of the day your safety, and especially that of your unborn child, must be paramount and always given the highest priority in any decisions.

Healthcare overseas;

If problems with your pregnancy did arise, being at home with your friends and family and a known healthcare system offers the best chance of getting things sorted. Being miles away, often in a hotter climate, perhaps with doctors not speaking English as their first language, does present problems.

Stage of pregnancy;

Pregnancy can be easily divided into 3 stages. During the **first stage** you may feel nauseated and lightheaded. Travelling (long-haul flights, hotter climates etc) may make this more significant. Also more pregnancies terminate in this first 3 months.

In the **second stage** of pregnancy most pregnant women are well and, if they have to travel, this may be the best and safest time. During the **third stage** of pregnancy you will be carrying an extra load! This makes exercise more tiring and the pressure on your bladder may mean that you need to find a loo more frequently. Again, not an ideal time to travel. Also airlines will not allow those pregnant to travel close to the date of delivery. (In some cases this is as early as 26 weeks). Some ladies look well beyond their actual dates but the airlines usually go on appearance!

Proposed itinerary;

Obviously where you plan to visit is critically important with regard to safety while abroad. In many of the overseas holiday destinations there are few English speaking doctors and it may be difficult to explain any symptoms you experience. Also remember any adventure holidays may just be too exhausting.

Energy levels and heat exhaustion;

During pregnancy the body diverts some blood flow to the womb as this energy is required for the development of your child. You may become tired much more easily from even mild exercise. It is essential that you maintain a good fluid intake and allow yourself sensible rest times so that exhaustion does not occur. You will also be more sensitive to temperature changes. A good, balanced and safe diet is also be essential during your pregnancy.

Malarial prophylaxis;

During pregnancy the basic rule is to try and avoid all drugs unless they are absolutely necessary. In some destinations, for all travellers, it will be advised to take tablets to protect against malaria. In these areas, during pregnancy, you will be more susceptible to some of the very serious and rapid effects of malaria and so it is essential that you take your tablets regularly. Even then the level of protection is not complete. However some of the commonly used tablets for the more serious forms of malaria are contraindicated at times during pregnancy (eg mefloquine, doxycycline, malarone) and so this may place you - and also your unborn child - at a higher and unacceptable risk.

WHO Information on travelling if pregnant (2007)

Malaria in a pregnant woman increases the risk of maternal death, miscarriage, stillbirth and low birth weight with associated risk of neonatal death. **Pregnant women should be advised to avoid travelling to areas where malaria transmission occurs.** When travel cannot be avoided, it is very important to take effective preventive measures against malaria, even when travelling to areas with transmission only of vivax malaria. Pregnant women should seek medical help immediately if malaria is suspected.....There is very limited information on the safety and efficacy of most anti-malarials in pregnancy, particularly during the first trimester.

Immunisations during pregnancy;

It is usually advised not to take any medication during pregnancy - and remember vaccines are medications. This advice is especially true during the first 3 months while the foetus is developing so rapidly. This means that you may not wish to use the basic vaccines which would usually be recommended. However, where necessary, some of the vaccines may be offered as this is regarded as the lesser of two evils! Experience throughout the world does suggest that many of the vaccines are safe in pregnancy but formal research has not usually been carried out (for fairly obvious reasons!).

Summary;

It is difficult to give adequate vaccine protection and pregnancy will tend to lower the personal immunity against many infections. In most cases the risks to both mother and child are just not worth the risks - unless the trip is considered to be essential. Having serious health problems when abroad is something to be avoided at all costs where possible. In many regions of the world the level of adequately screened blood or competent medical attention may be less than you would expect at home.

Bottom Line;

This is a very exciting time and fantastic news for most people. Doctors may differ on how careful you should be if travelling while pregnant but nevertheless our opinion would be that taking unnecessary risks just doesn't make sense and so in most cases a non-essential pleasure trip overseas should be avoided during pregnancy where at all possible.

National Travel Vaccine Appointment Tel 1-850-48 76 74

Web Address: www.tmb.ie

This leaflet has been prepared using information supplied from WHO, the Center for Disease Control (US) and other international sources.

- ✓ Travel Accessories *Pregnancy/TMB/updated14Aug2007*
- ✓ Tropical Diagnostic Laboratory
- ✓ Tropical Disease Screening Centre
- ✓ W.H.O. registered Yellow Fever Vaccination Centre
- ✓ International Vaccination and Malaria Advice Centres

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