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A Q&A ON ALL ABOUT PREGNANCY AND FACE TO FACE WITH ADJ A/PROF WEE HORNG YEN

In this issue, Adj A/Prof Dr Wee Horng Yen, Senior Consultant and Director, Women Wellness Centre, KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH); Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School, answers questions in:

ALL ABOUT PREGNANCY



What are the common worries that pregnant women have? Especially the first-time mum and older women?

The number one worry is whether their baby is healthy. First time mums worry about what labour pains will be like, and whether they can deliver naturally. They worry about diet, exercise, sexual activities and air travel. Older women worry if they are too old to push and give birth naturally. Some also worry about the risk of Down Syndrome babies.

What are the alarming symptoms a pregnant woman should take note of? How can they try to reduce the risk of complication?

Pregnant women should seek medical advice promptly if they experience vaginal bleeding especially if it is heavy, and associated with pain. When the above occurs, this means that the pregnancy is very unstable: Threatened miscarriage if early pregnancy or premature labour or bleeding in the uterus which requires immediate attention. Women can reduce the risk of pregnancy complications by:

1. Attending regular antenatal care
2. Stop smoking and alcohol
3. Exerting excellent control of their medical condition e.g. the diabetic must control blood sugar levels well; otherwise, the baby can become very large and lead to serious birth complications as the baby gets stuck.
4. Taking a balanced diet
5. Having adequate rest and exercise
6. Seeking medical attention early when feeling unwell

What causes the morning sickness? How can the pregnant women better cope with it?

Morning sickness is caused by the changes in the pregnancy hormones. However, the "morning" part is a myth as it can occur at any time of the day. Some women may not experience any morning sickness. Coping strategies include:

1. Taking smaller meals but more frequently
2. Taking medications (many medications are safe for use in pregnancy)
3. Avoid spicy food
4. Avoid food with certain strong smells that induce nausea.

Sometimes, pregnant women have craving for particular food and husbands get frustrated or find it troublesome. Why do pregnant women crave for particular food?

Craving is believed to be related to the increased levels of hormones in pregnancy. There are no specific food types and the type of food woman craves for in a subsequent pregnancy differs. It is important to manage the craving, and take a balanced diet. Excessive food intake from craving can lead to maternal obesity and increased risk of diabetes.

Besides feeling physically uncomfortable, pregnant women might face emotional issues too. How can the pregnant women cope with these emotional issues?

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I usually meet with the couple many times during the antenatal visits. The husband and extended family play an important supportive role. Hormonal changes during pregnancy and in the six weeks after increase the risk to depression. Husbands are educated that their wife's responses are secondary to hormones. A good listening ear is critical from the husband during this period. Often all that is needed is for her husband to listen and understand what she is going through. Once the patient feels understood and communicates her concerns well with her husband, she is emotionally much stronger.

In Singapore, there are still many myths surrounding pregnancy. Examples include:

1. You cannot wash your hair during confinement
2. You cannot shower during confinement
3. You cannot take cold drinks or ice cubes during pregnancy
4. You cannot take seafood during pregnancy
5. Avoid pineapples during pregnancy

I often hear of conflicts and stress between extended family and patients over who is right or wrong regarding the above myths. I often ask my patients to put things in perspective, be mindful that the extended family meant well when they dispense the myth, and try to focus on maintaining the family harmony. They can always take more pineapples a few months later.

What will be your advice to the husband? How can the men help their wife to cope with the stress and make them happy mother?

Adding to the above points, always listen and communicate with your wife.

How many types of supplements do a pregnant woman has to take? Some pregnant women worry that these supplements may have side effects, e.g. the cause of hyperactive babies, is it true? If they are not comfortable with taking supplements, can they get enough nutrients from their diet? What kind of diet should they observe?

They should have a healthy balanced diet. There should be a good variety of all food groups; meat, fish vegetables and fruits. In addition, adequate calcium is important. The source could be from milk, milk powders or tablets. A healthy balanced diet is sufficient without the need to supplement with tablets. As constipation is common in pregnancy and causes much discomfort, patients should take plenty of fruits, vegetables and fluids if they are prone to this.

FACE TO FACE WITH ADJ A/PROF WEE HORNG YEN



What motivated you to be an O&G doctor? Through the years, what is the most memorable and / or most painful moment?

O&G is a mainly surgical discipline and I enjoy performing surgery and delivering babies. The safe arrival of a new baby never ceases to bring a smile for me. During my first year of specialist O&G training in Glasgow, Scotland, I rented an apartment within ten minutes from the hospital. I asked the midwives to call me to assist the consultants in difficult cases so that I can see and learn more. My consultants commented that I appeared very alert even in the wee hours of the night (often 2 to 5am). The adrenaline and fascination of the difficult cases kept me wide awake. That was when I thought I probably should be able to do this in the long run.

The most memorable moment was when a patient who has severe womb scarring consequent infertility due to a childhood illness, managed to conceive twins after treatment. Subsequently, her pregnancy was complicated by the severe scars. I had to deliver her prematurely by caesarean section due to the severe scar pain. As anticipated, the surgery was extremely complex due to the scarring. I was very happy when she recovered very well. Her routine one month review was normal and her boy and girl were doing well.

The most painful moment was when I went to witness the devastation from the Aceh Tsunami in 2005. I was very humbled by the resilience of the women. Our Singapore team went out to the camps to provide antenatal care.

From some of the forums, we see mothers singing praises of you as a personal and patient doctor and you even reply the patient's sms when they need advice. What motivated you to go the extra mile?

My patients are very re-assured when they see me. It is a privilege that they trust me, it is this trust that motivates me to be there for them.

Are you married? How many kids? Amidst your busy schedule, how do you achieve work-life balance?

I am married with one son (seven years old). I have strong support from my parents who have been a rock for me.

Staying very close to each other, and KK Hospital, has allowed me to enjoy easy family time across three generations.

What are your hobbies?

Swimming and reading. Having lived ten years in Great Britain where the weather is mainly cold, I treasure very much the warm and relatively consistent weather here. Taking a dive and swim in Singapore is still one of life's simply divine pleasures.

Do you enjoy the current lifestyle? Looking forward, is there anything in life that you would like to achieve?

My current life is hectic and I enjoy every moment. As the case variety is high in KKH, I enjoy being a mentor to my O&G residents. With the high case load, I mature and refine my clinical wisdom. My fondness for teaching keeps me updated and always on my toes about the latest scientific developments. I enjoy teaching the medical students from both universities. I lecture in the region and thoroughly enjoy sharing our knowledge with our counterparts and understand the challenges they face in their own country.

Looking forward, there are big plans ahead for better training of O&G residents. I think it is important to pass on the surgical skills, nurture and support the next generation of specialist. I look forward to my involvement in this.

What is your philosophy of life and work?

Enjoy what you do and every day is a beautiful one!

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KKJC is a parenting club of KK Women's and Children's Hospital that offers specially designed programmes and activities to equip its members with the knowledge on child development and parenting. For more information, please visit: <http://www.kkh.com.sg/>

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