Is it risky to have a baby after turning 35? [1]

Dear Alice,

Is there an age limit that is considered dangerous to carry a baby, i.e., 35 years old? Is it true that babies from older mothers are more likely to have complications?

Wondering!

Answer

Dear Wondering!,

It’s no surprise it’s referred to as “the miracle of life” — the art of conception is a complicated and astonishing choreography of many factors, age being only one of them. First things first: while the risk of complications do rise with age, women over 35 do bring healthy li’l ones into the world without complications and there does not seem to be a certain age at which it suddenly becomes “dangerous” to have a baby. However, it’s not a bad idea to be informed about the risks a woman over 35 might face as compared to her younger counterparts.

The main concern for women over 35 is the decrease in fertility. Time for a bit of a biology lesson: as a woman approaches her mid-30s, her supply of eggs (which she was born with) begins to decrease in both quantity and quality. This means that, sometimes, a woman over 35 will not always release an egg during her monthly cycle. And when there’s no egg coming down the pipeline to be fertilized, it’s not possible for her to get pregnant. Eventually (after menopause [2]), eggs stop being released altogether. There are lots of assisted reproductive technologies [3] out there to help with fertility issues (although some are quite pricey!). If you are interested, a health care provider can help you navigate those options.

The second issue some might need to think about is the risk of birth defects due to the declining quality of the eggs. The cell infrastructure of older eggs has a harder time dividing correctly, which can lead to conditions like Down syndrome. For instance, a 20 year old woman has a 1 in 1,600 chance of having a baby with Down syndrome, whereas a 35 year old woman has a 1 in 365 chance. The risk continues to increase with age, with a 45 year old woman having a 1 in 30 chance of having a child with Down syndrome. Talking with a health care provider about the possibilities of birth defects may be an important step for women over 35 who are trying to become pregnant.

Another reason women over 35 sometimes face more complications is simply because more “stuff” has likely happened to them over the course of their lives. Having things like previous
abdominal surgeries near the fallopian tubes or uterus, high blood pressure or diabetes, previous reproductive tract infections, or endometriosis [4] can complicate things or make miscarriages more likely. Again, chatting with a health care provider about your specific risk factors can help give you a better picture of the potential challenges or complications.

Although it may seem like the odds are against women over 35, many do have perfectly healthy pregnancies. Keep in mind that pregnancy is a complex orchestra; no one is able to perfectly predict or prevent everything, regardless of the mother’s age. However, there are some things women in their 30s (or at any age!) may want to consider if they are hoping to become pregnant:

- Refrain from alcohol, tobacco, and recreational drug use, which can complicate pregnancies
- Consult with a health care provider about the use of any over-the-counter or prescription medications
- Exercise regularly before and during pregnancy
- Maintain a healthy weight before and during pregnancy
- Begin taking a multivitamin with at least 400 mg of folic acid, which can protect a baby against many developmental birth defects, like spina bifida [5]
- Schedule regular visits with a health care provider to assess health before and during pregnancy

Here’s to healthy babies and moms!

Alice!
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