

Pregnancy as a stage of human development



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Pregnancy and child birth marks a distinct period in the life of a woman and almost every woman desires to experience motherhood.

Being a mother myself and having undergone the complex process of pregnancy, I can understand that though the period of pregnancy might not be very simple, the ultimate experience of giving birth to a new life is so joyous, comforting and fulfilling that a mother forgets all the woes and troubles, she had gone through during her pregnancy, as soon as she takes a look a look at her new born child. Growth and development of the fetus The complete growth and development of the baby right from the time of conception to the time of delivery, also known as period of gestation (lasting for about 40 weeks or nine months in human beings), comprises of certain distinct phases. These phases begin with sexual maturation of gonads, release of gametes (ova in females and spermatozoa in males), and conception (fertilization between an ovum and sperm). The fertilization between ovum and spermatozoa results in zygote formation, which then goes through the following stages of development: blastocyst formation and implantation (10-14 days after fertilization), embryo development stage (from conception to 10 weeks of gestation), fetal stage (11 weeks to 20 weeks of gestation) and perinatal stage (21weeks to 40 weeks).

These stages ultimately are followed by the birth of the baby (William's Obstetrics, 2002). The physiological changes in the baby occurring during these stages and my own experiences during these stages of pregnancy would be described in detail in this paper. I would also be describing about the impact of pregnancy on the other family members, and the societal and ethical issues related to assisted fertility treatments, teenage mothers and

adoption. Release of gametes The earliest stage that occurs prior to conception is release of gametes in both males and females.

Release of gametes (ovum) in females is known as ovulation. Though the exact time of ovulation varies from woman to woman, the approximate time of ovulation in a woman who has periods lasting for 28 days is the middle of her period i. e. about 14th day (William's Obstetrics, 2002) .

Embryonic stage (from conception to 10 weeks of gestation) Following ovulation, the ovum can survive for about 24-48 hours, after which it dies away. If during this time, a sperm (as a result of sexual intercourse) reaches the fallopian tube, it can fertilize the ovum. Fertilization of the ovum with sperm results in formation of a single celled structure called zygote, which is the earliest stage of the developing embryo. This is the first cell that, in the coming nine months, would become fully developed into a baby (William's Obstetrics, 2002). The cells of the zygote undergo series of mitotic reactions resulting in an increase in the number of cells.

The zygote at the same time also travels from the fallopian tube and reaches the uterine cavity. The zygote at this stage is known as an embryo. The embryo then gets implanted on the posterior wall of the uterine cavity on about 10-14 days after conception. At this stage the developing embryo is known as blastocyst (William's Obstetrics, 2002). At the time of implantation, spotting may occur. I also experienced some bleeding (spotting) for a few days and started believing that my period was starting.

Later I was told by my doctor that this bleeding was due to implantation of the embryo on the wall of the uterine cavity. After this, further development

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of the embryo takes place with the embryonic period lasting for about first 10 weeks of gestation. During this period, the initial development of all major organs occurs. By the end of the embryonic period, the baby's arms legs, fingers and toes have developed and embryo has a distinct human appearance (William's Obstetrics, 2002). During this period my breasts became tender and swollen and I stopped having my periods, which lasted through out the entire duration of my pregnancy.

The other symptoms which I experienced were fatigue, nausea, increased sensitivity to the smell of food, bloating, and frequent urination. Fetal stage (weeks 11-20) By approximately 10 weeks of gestation, the embryo develops into a recognizable human being, known as fetus. This is followed by a fetal stage during which further maturation of the baby's organs, which lasts for about 11-20 weeks of gestation, takes place. The baby starts reacting to stimuli such as vibrations and pressure (William's Obstetrics, 2002). By the end of fetal stage, most of the baby's organs have become fairly well developed and have started functioning.

However the baby cannot survive on its own because the lungs have not yet begun to function. During this period the baby begins to suck, swallow and blink. The baby learns to breathe as its lungs start developing (William's Obstetrics, 2002). A white cheese like material (vernix) forms on the baby's skin in order to protect the baby's skin during the time it remains in water (amniotic fluid) inside the uterine cavity. When my baby was born, I saw her covered with this white stuff.

Now I know what that was for. During the visit to my doctor, I could hear the heart beat of my baby with help of a Doppler. The baby's heart beat was very fast. My doctor told me that the baby's heart beat was absolutely normal. I did not feel any nausea during this stage, my energy levels returned back to levels similar to that prior to pregnancy and I felt much better in comparison to what I felt during the first few months of pregnancy.

The pregnant woman, during 16-20 weeks of gestation is usually able to feel slight fluttering movements in the abdomen. These sensations are caused by movements of the fetus inside the uterine cavity. The day these movements are first recognized by the pregnant woman is designated as quickening (William's Obstetrics, 2002). I experienced quickening at about fourth month of pregnancy. This feeling was very tender and felt like fluttering of bird's feathers. Soon thereafter I could feel the baby moving.

My baby slept while I was moving; I could guess this from the gentle rocking motion, I felt inside my abdomen. However, when I lay down to sleep or rest, she woke up and started to move and kick. If there was a loud noise, my baby would wake up and start moving. She kept me awake quite often. Sometimes she kicked really hard. I kept on working even when I was pregnant.

Constant talking and noise at work was very calming for my baby. I realized during this time that my baby could feel and hear. When I felt that my baby was awake, I would often talk to her. By the time the fetus is 12 weeks of gestation, the sex organs have developed and the baby's sex can be recognized (William's Obstetrics, 2002). During this time the umbilical cord,

which serves as a connector between the placenta and the baby begins to circulate blood from the mother to the fetus, providing nourishment.

As a result, everything that the mother ingests flows through the umbilical cord to the embryo. Thus the pregnant lady is asked to avoid alcohol, drugs, and tobacco during the period of her pregnancy as these things can prove harmful to the developing baby. Though I frequently suffered from allergies during my pregnancy, I was afraid to take any medications. On another trip to the doctor at about 12-14 weeks, I had a sonogram done and that is when I learned about the sex of my baby. This was a very exciting time. We still have a picture of the sonogram in the baby book.

During this time of pregnancy, my breasts and belly started growing even larger. I also experienced skin changes (discoloration of skin on the face), nasal and gum bleeding problems, leg cramps, heart burns, constipation, shortness of breath, and bladder infection. I often suffered from dizziness due to which I had to be careful not to get up too quickly. I also frequently experienced painless contractions at irregular intervals from the early stages of my pregnancy. On asking my doctor she told me that these contractions, also known as Braxton-hicks contractions are a normal feature of pregnancy. Perinatal stage (weeks 21-40 weeks) After 29 weeks of pregnancy my doctor told me my baby's lung had become functional and she would have a good chance of surviving even if I had a premature delivery i.

e. I had her earlier before completed period of gestation. During this period, I kept on putting weight and my belly kept on growing larger and larger giving

me the feeling that I was going to pop. I weighed 105 lb before I was pregnant.

During the last month of my pregnancy, I weighed about 135 lb. Thank God for my stretch pants, which still fitted me... It was hard to walk and I developed a waddling gait. Stretch marks appeared on my huge tummy, my joints popped, my back ached and I felt as if my body was falling apart. I also developed swelling of my feet and ankles. Since my job required me to stand all day, I wore open shoes.

Other symptoms I experienced during this period were shortness of breath, appearance of spider veins (thin veins) over my abdomen, hemorrhoids, nose bleeds, huge breasts, frequent urination, and Braxton hick's contractions. Finally during the ninth month of my pregnancy, the contractions didn't quit and continued to get stronger and stronger and started occurring more frequently. Finally it was the time to go to the hospital. I endured hours of contractions and pain in an attempt to have a natural birth.

However, when the heart beat of my baby begin to decline, I decided to have a caesarian section. I was so happy when my baby was born healthy. Effects of pregnancy upon family members Initially both the parents are euphoric after hearing the news of pregnancy. But almost at once the euphoria is replaced with the dawning awareness of future responsibility.

Due to feelings of helplessness and inadequacy associated with pregnancy, at some point or the other, most of the parents-to-be begin to wonder why they ever let them selves in for such an adjustment. Effects of pregnancy on

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the would-be mother As the pregnant woman struggles through this turmoil of ambivalent emotions, she is specially vulnerable to seek the support of others. Often in an effort to accept her new condition, the woman turns to her own mother or her mother-in-law for support. However before doing that, she might have already spent a great deal of her own and her family's energy in the attempt to solve her dilemmas regarding pregnancy. In the process, she is likely to withdraw somewhat from her previous relationships especially that with her husband. Due to stress her emotions are highly heightened.

The pregnant woman often begins to feel ugly, vulnerable and insecure.