Management of epilepsy before pregnancy

Discussions should begin before you become pregnant. That way, your neurologist can work with you to optimize your chances of having a healthy baby while remaining seizure free. Discuss with your neurologist the type of seizure medications you are currently on and any use of over-the-counter supplements. These dicussions should take place prior to becoming pregnant, during pregnancy, and after the baby is born. Keep your docotor informed of any changes in your medication or supplement use.

Before becoming pregnant, work with your neurologist to reduce medications. Medications used to stop seizures can cause birth defects, especially at high doses and in combination with other medications. They may also result in babies that are small for their age. This risk increases if you smoke. The goal is to balance the lowest dose of medications to prevent seizures with reducing risks to the developing baby. The neurologist may want to monitor blood levels of medications when the seizures are under good control.

All women of child-bearing age should take at least 0.4 mg of folic acid every day to prevent neural tube defects (spina bifida). Women with epilepsy may need higher doses of folic acid because seizure medications may cause these levels to be low. Women with epilepsy should discuss with their health care provider the exact doses of supplementation that they recommend.

Once you find out that you are pregnant, let your neurologist know as soon as possible. DO NOT stop your medications. Although you may be concerned about birth defects, having a seizure can also cause harm.

How do seizures affect pregnancy?

Some seizure types during pregnancy may cause harm to the developing fetus.

Generalized seizures can cause injury from falls, lack of oxygen to the mother and the baby, and rupture of membranes that can cause premature labor. Depending on when the generalized seizure happens during the pregnancy, it can result in spontaneous abortions or stillbirths. Nonconvulsive seizures have been shown to cause increased heart rate in the fetus, but no significant harm has been noted unless the seizure results in an accident.

Continued seizures or status epilepticus is a medical emergency and needs to be controlled quickly. This condition can cause many changes to the mother's body. These changes can be transferred to the fetus and may result in injury and abnormal development.

How does pregnancy affect seizures?

Pregnancy can affect seizures. Morning sickness can be so severe that you cannot keep your medications down and levels of medication may fall.

The pregnant body changes the way it handles medications. The absorption decreases and elimination increases; both cause levels to drop and increases the risk of seizures. For this reason, the neurologist may want you to have frequent blood levels to keep track of changes. The dose of seizure medications may need to be increased during the pregnancy to keep levels steady. If seizures occur, this may be a sign that the levels are too low, and the dose needs to be adjusted.

The physical changes during pregnancy and changes in sleep pattern can also increase the likelihood of having seizures. Paying attention to these factors can reduce the chances of having a seizure.

Management of epilepsy during pregnancy

You should be able to deliver your infant in a calm, supportive environment. If stress is a triggering factor for your seizures, you should discuss your concerns with your obstetrician ahead of time and develop a plan for pain and stress management durign labor. This may include an epidural anesthesia if appropriate.

If you do have a seizure during labor, you should be stabilized first. A seizure can cause a decrease in baby's heart rates; an emergency caesarian section may be necessary.

Some seizure medications can affect vitamin K, which is important in blood clotting. It is important for newborns to receive an injection of vitamin K immediately after birth to prevent bleeding.

Management of epilepsy after pregnancy

The neurologist should be notified immediately after the baby has been born. If there has been an increase in medications during the pregnancy, there may be a need to rapidly decrease the dose to prevent side effects.

The decision on how to feed the infant is an important discussion to have with health care providers. The infant has been exposed to seizure medications throughout the pregnancy. Seizure medications are passed through breast milk. The amount varies by the properties of the seizure medications, but typically it is in small amounts.

Infant care should be modified in women who have seizures. You should have an active role as a parent, but a partner or family member may need to help with carrying, feeding, and bathing in case you lose awareness. The new mother with epilepsy should make sure to get enough sleep and may need help with night time feedings and child care.

Epilepsy and Pregnancy

Epilepsy or "seizure disorder" is a chronic condition where people have recurrent seizures. There are over 2 million people in the United States who have epilepsy and it is the 4th most common neurological condition. It affects people of all ages.

Seizures are caused by abnormal electrical events produced by the brain. There are many kinds of seizures. They can vary from generalized convulsions to subtle loss of awareness. If not controlled, epilepsy can affect one's lifestyle by limitating driving, work opportunities, safety and relationships.

Medications are typically used to treat seizures. These medications need to be monitored for their effectiveness and side effects. If they do not control the seizures, there are alternative methods such as surgery, devices, or other options.

There are over 1.5 million women with epilepsy of child-bearing age and over 90% of the infants born to these women are normal. Most pregnant women with epilepsy who are under neurological care and get prenatal care have no change in their seizure frequency during pregnancy.

The neurologist and the OB/Gyn should work together to ensure the most healthy pregnancy possible.

Women with epilepsy can increase their chances for a healthy pregnancy by getting early prenatal care and working with their health care providers in the management of their disease. Always consult your health care provider for more information regarding treatment for epilepsy and pregnancy.

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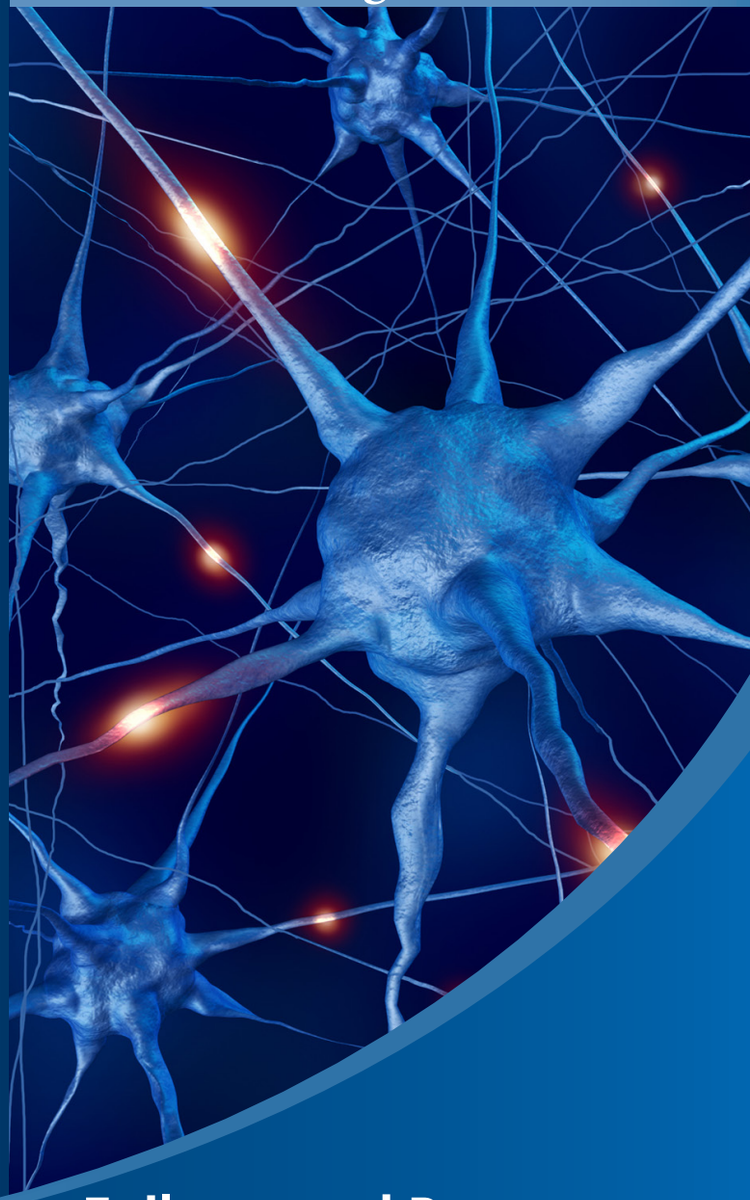

Epilepsy and Pregnancy

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