



Prenatal care benefits from medical advances

BY TODD SLISS
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Improvements and breakthroughs in science and technology have made prenatal care a much less stressful and hazardous time in the life of soon-to-be parents. Whether it's physically or mentally, parents can breathe a little easier when it comes to preparing themselves for a months-long process that hopefully sees them delivering and caring for a healthy, happy baby.

"Prenatal care is a very important part of pregnancy," said Dr. Navid Mootabar, chairman of the department of gynecology and obstetrics at Northern Westchester Hospital of Mount Kisco. "From my standpoint it's very satisfying to take care of somebody for nine months, guide them through a healthy pregnancy and be able to deliver a healthy baby into a happy environment. Unfortunately sometimes problems do arise during a pregnancy and we address them and take care of them as best as possible."

For Dr. Nabil Khoury, an obstetrician-gynecologist at White Plains Hospital Center, lifestyle planning is an important part of that first pregnancy visit to the doctor.

"After that first visit, the patient is reassured and taught about dietary habits, exercise and avoidance of harmful substances and foods," Khoury said. "The patient is started on a vitamin supplementation, trying to avoid the occurrence of genetic abnormalities in the baby, such as spina bifida. Also, medical problems are discussed and risk factors identified that might cause potential complications."

Women who are closer in age to or over 40 are having children with much greater frequency, which is less of an issue medically than ever before, though it still has its risks.

"The biggest change from the past is delayed child bearing age in women," Khoury said. "With aging comes the increased incidence of multiple genetic diseases for the baby, such as Down syndrome, as well as diseases of aging of the mother such as high blood pressure, diabetes and obesity.



In addition, there is more need for assisted reproduction, resulting in more multiple gestations."

Mootabar has been practicing for 11 years. "The fundamentals of prenatal care haven't changed, which is giving preventative care to identify problems during a pregnancy," he said. "What has changed in the 11 years is the new tests that are available to us, particularly better and more accurate ultrasounds and less invasive testing for genetic diseases."

"With the advance of ultrasonography, fetal monitoring has been improved dramatically," Khoury said. "We are able to track from visit to visit the growth of the baby, the fetal anatomy, organ development, etc. Also, newer genetic testing with fetal mapping is available and we are able to screen for more genetic diseases, which in the past could only be discovered at birth. These days, they are discovered before the 15th week of pregnancy, which gives a mother more options."

Earlier detection is really what sets today apart from two years ago, 10 years ago, 20 years ago and so on. Most recently, a blood

test detects over 99 percent accuracy Down syndrome and "virtually replaces the amniocentesis, which is the needle we passed through a woman's belly," Mootabar said.

That procedure used to carry risk of miscarriage. "Now with the new blood test there's lower risk of any issues," Mootabar said. "That's one of the major revolutionary changes in the last few years, this blood test. Not only Down syndrome but a couple of other chromosomal abnormalities."

Not everyone had the amnio and not everyone has this particular blood test done.

"The way that I talk to my patients is to have them think about what they are going to do with that information," Mootabar said. "If you're going to make decisions on a pregnancy and decide not to continue if the baby has Down syndrome, then go ahead and have the test. If you feel like whatever God gives you you're fine with, then you don't have to do the test. The other reason why a lot of people do the test is just to be prepared."

Further enhancements in testing could one day create a crystal ball for medical

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practitioners. “On the horizon is the whole issue of genetic testing, trying to be able to isolate diseases that occur as adults as early as in the growing fetus,” Mootabar said. “There are a lot of deadly diseases that occur in people and I think on the horizon with genetic testing we’ll be able to see if a fetus carries these diseases.”

Access to medical care for mother and child is paramount in ensuring the best possible outcome. Monitoring mom and baby is nothing new and “it all started with listening to the baby’s heartbeat with a stethoscope,” Mootabar said. Next up was the Doppler to hear the baby’s heartbeat and then the first edition of the ultrasound machine.

“With better technology of ultrasound machines over the past decade, we’ve done a much better job of monitoring the well-being of the baby,” Mootabar said. “Problems are problems, but we’ve been able to detect problems in an earlier stage and treat them more accurately. Things like preterm labor we’ve done a better job of determining and preventing.”

Pre-prenatal care?

Psychoanalyst Ann Rose Simon, who has been in private practice with locations in Hartsdale and Manhattan for over 30 years, has a different approach for moms-and-dads-to-be. Simon works with a lot of couples, but they usually start with her after there are family issues, often stemming from a problem with the child(ren), whether it be eating issues, anxiety or something else.

It’s important, she said, to lay the groundwork before, not after, and let parents know the different possibilities that await them.

“Very often you see patterns which had they been identified early on, had the parents really opened themselves up to saying, ‘Who am I?’ ‘Who is my partner?’ and ‘How can we be sure how we parent and how we are together?’ creates the optimal environment for our children,” Simon said. “Most people don’t do that.”

Babies are a permanent part of our lives and the challenge never ends — it’s constantly evolving, usually changing once you get used to the current phase of life. Preparing yourself for this journey is key for parents, and Simon can help.

“There’s always a lot of anxiety about here I’m going to be a new parent and there’s no turning back,” Simon said. “This is a life-long thing and there’s a lot of anxiety about it. Join the club. All parents to some degree have that feeling.”



Just like you would set up a nursery and maybe even hire a decorator, there are many things to think about that Simon admits will not prevent future arguments, but will definitely avoid some issues between mom and dad. She helps them look at their upbringing. Were they raised differently? Do they have similar feelings about discipline? Letting the baby cry? Talking about these things upfront will lead to easier problem-solving later on. And the last thing you want is for these issues to impact your marriage in a negative way or “otherwise spill over to the child,” Simon said.

Among the exercises Simon has parents go through before the baby is born is to talk about their “hopes and dreams for baby.” It’s something we all have and usually those expectations are extremely high. And why shouldn’t they be? But what happens when those expectations aren’t met in childhood and beyond?

“The problem arises, and I see this a lot, that they have very rigid hopes and dreams,” Simon said. “If your child is different from the ideal child you had in your head, then it’s very difficult to accept that person. What they want to be might be perfectly fine in the world, but not what you want. Even as a baby, your baby might be very audible and that’s not what you imagined. That’s going to be hard to tolerate unless you come to accept that there are different elements in baby. To be open to what you want and hope for, but open to the possibility that the

child may be very different and accept it and appreciate it.”

Setting this groundwork is similar to setting up the nursery and hiring a decorator. And like you would babyproof your house, you also have to “babyproof your marriage.”

Some couples, as soon as the kids are born, everything other than work comes to a halt. “They never go out together, or very rarely because everything is built around the kids,” Simon said. “Their coupleness disappears and that’s dangerous. It’s an important role to be a partner to your partner.”

There is also a medical side where parents can focus on everyone’s well-being even before conception — Mootabar called it “preconception counseling.”

“Discussing pregnancy shouldn’t wait until you are pregnant,” he said. “This starts before you’re pregnant to consider becoming pregnant. Come sit down with your doctor and identify any risk factors that we can decrease before pregnancy. It’s starting to get into a healthy diet and exercise routine. When you talk about preparation it’s not just prenatal care — preconception counseling is important.”