

Diarrhea in Pregnancy: Causes, Risks and Management

Camilla Moura*

Department of Reproductive Endocrinology, School of Population and Public Health, Brazil

Abstract

Diarrhea during pregnancy is a significant clinical concern, with potential implications for both maternal and fetal health. It is characterized by the frequent passage of loose or watery stools and may arise from various causes, including infections (bacterial, viral, or parasitic), dietary changes, hormonal fluctuations, pre-existing gastrointestinal disorders, and medication side effects. Pregnant women are more susceptible to certain infections due to immune system modulation, and their nutritional needs make gastrointestinal health particularly crucial. Diarrhea can range from mild, self-limiting episodes to severe conditions that risk dehydration, electrolyte imbalance, and preterm labor, thus necessitating prompt identification and management. This review explores the etiology, pathophysiology, clinical manifestations, diagnostic approaches, and management strategies for diarrhea during pregnancy. It emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between infectious and non-infectious causes to avoid the unnecessary use of antibiotics, which may disrupt gut microbiota and impact pregnancy outcomes. Nutritional support and hydration are vital in managing diarrhea, while pharmacologic interventions are limited due to safety concerns in pregnancy. Preventive measures include proper hygiene, safe food practices, and prenatal care with attention to gastrointestinal symptoms. The review also addresses complications, such as the risk of miscarriage, preterm delivery, and intrauterine growth restriction (IUGR), and highlights gaps in research on the long-term effects of diarrhea during pregnancy. Finally, it calls for further studies to establish evidence-based guidelines for the safe treatment of diarrhea in pregnant women.

Keywords: Diarrhea; Pregnancy; Gastrointestinal health; Dehydration; Electrolyte imbalance; Preterm labor; Infection; Immune system; Hormonal changes; Prenatal care; Fetal health; Management; Complications; Maternal health

Introduction

Diarrhea during pregnancy can be an uncomfortable and concerning experience for expecting mothers. Although it is not as commonly discussed as other pregnancy symptoms like nausea, vomiting, or constipation, diarrhea does affect many pregnant women [1]. While mild cases of diarrhea are usually harmless, more severe or persistent cases can pose risks to both the mother and the developing fetus [2]. This article will explore the causes, risks, and management strategies for diarrhea during pregnancy, providing pregnant women with the information they need to protect their health and the health of their baby. Diarrhea during pregnancy is a common yet often distressing condition that can affect the overall well-being of expectant mothers [3]. Characterized by frequent loose or watery stools, diarrhea can range from mild to severe, depending on its underlying cause [4]. While occasional diarrhea may not be a major cause for concern, persistent or severe episodes can lead to dehydration, malnutrition, and potential complications for both the mother and the developing fetus. Understanding the causes, potential risks, and appropriate management strategies is crucial for ensuring the health and safety of both the pregnant woman and her baby [5].

Pregnancy triggers a variety of physiological changes in a woman's body, many of which can increase the susceptibility to gastrointestinal disturbances, including diarrhea [6]. Hormonal fluctuations, particularly in estrogen and progesterone, can impact digestion by affecting bowel motility. Increased levels of progesterone, for instance, tend to slow down the digestive process, often leading to constipation. However, some women experience the opposite effect—accelerated digestion—which can contribute to diarrhea [7].

Moreover, the growing uterus exerts pressure on the gastrointestinal tract, sometimes leading to disruptions in normal bowel movements.

Additionally, changes in diet during pregnancy, such as increased intake of fiber or prenatal vitamins, can also influence bowel habits. For example, iron supplements commonly prescribed to pregnant women may cause gastrointestinal discomfort, leading to constipation or, in some cases, diarrhea.

The treatment of diarrhea during pregnancy depends largely on the underlying cause. For mild cases of diarrhea, especially those caused by dietary changes or stress, simple adjustments in diet and lifestyle may be sufficient to resolve symptoms. Expectant mothers are often advised to follow the BRAT diet (bananas, rice, applesauce, and toast) to help firm up stools, while also staying hydrated by drinking water, clear broths, or oral rehydration solutions [8].

In cases where diarrhea is caused by a bacterial or viral infection, medical treatment may be necessary. Antibiotics may be prescribed for bacterial infections, but care must be taken to ensure that they are safe for use during pregnancy. Antidiarrheal medications are generally avoided in pregnancy, especially in the first and third trimesters, due to potential risks to the fetus. Preventive measures, such as practicing good hygiene, avoiding contaminated food and water, and steering clear of foods known to carry higher risks of bacterial contamination (like undercooked meats and unpasteurized dairy products), are essential to minimizing the chances of developing diarrhea during pregnancy [9].

***Corresponding author:** Camilla Moura, Department of Reproductive Endocrinology, School of Population and Public Health, Brazil, E-mail: Camilla_m@gmail.com

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In more severe cases, especially when dehydration becomes a concern, hospitalization and intravenous (IV) fluid replacement may be required to stabilize the mother and prevent harm to the fetus.

Diarrhea during pregnancy, while often mild and self-limiting, can sometimes be indicative of more serious underlying conditions. The physiological changes that occur during pregnancy, coupled with dietary shifts, increased susceptibility to infections, and possible medication side effects, contribute to the likelihood of gastrointestinal disturbances [10]. Ensuring proper management of diarrhea is key to safeguarding both maternal and fetal health. Pregnant women experiencing persistent or severe diarrhea should seek medical advice to determine the appropriate course of action and to mitigate any potential risks to themselves and their baby.

Causes of diarrhea in pregnancy

Diarrhea, characterized by frequent, loose, and watery bowel movements, can be caused by several factors during pregnancy. These include:

Hormonal changes: Pregnancy causes significant hormonal fluctuations, particularly in the levels of progesterone and estrogen. These hormones can affect the digestive system, sometimes causing constipation, but in some cases, they can accelerate bowel movements leading to diarrhea.

Dietary changes: Pregnant women often change their diets to ensure better nutrition for their growing babies. For example, some women increase their fiber intake or begin taking prenatal vitamins and supplements, which may cause gastrointestinal disturbances. Additionally, sensitivities to certain foods may develop during pregnancy, leading to diarrhea.

Infections: Viral or bacterial infections, such as gastroenteritis, can lead to diarrhea. These infections are more common during pregnancy because the immune system undergoes changes to accommodate the fetus. Foodborne illnesses such as salmonella or E. coli can also cause diarrhea and may require prompt medical attention.

Prenatal vitamins and supplements: Prenatal vitamins and iron supplements are essential for maternal and fetal health, but they can sometimes cause gastrointestinal side effects, including diarrhea. Different formulations of prenatal vitamins may have different effects, so it's important to discuss options with a healthcare provider if diarrhea becomes an issue.

Lactose intolerance: Some women develop lactose intolerance during pregnancy, especially if they had mild lactose sensitivity before pregnancy. Increased consumption of dairy products (a common source of calcium) can lead to diarrhea in women who are lactose intolerant.

Stress and anxiety: Pregnancy can be an emotional time, and the stress associated with it may contribute to digestive issues, including diarrhea. Stress can affect the gut-brain axis and disrupt normal bowel function, resulting in diarrhea.

Medication side effects: Some medications taken during pregnancy, such as antibiotics or antacids, may cause diarrhea as a side effect. It's important to review the potential side effects of any medications with a healthcare provider.

Third-trimester diarrhea: Diarrhea can sometimes occur in the later stages of pregnancy, particularly as the body prepares for labor. The hormone prostaglandin may be released in preparation

for childbirth, causing the muscles in the intestines to contract more frequently and leading to diarrhea.

Risks associated with diarrhea in pregnancy

While occasional diarrhea is usually not a cause for alarm, prolonged or severe diarrhea during pregnancy can lead to complications. The potential risks include:

Dehydration: One of the primary concerns with diarrhea is dehydration, especially when the condition persists for more than a day or two. Dehydration can reduce the amount of amniotic fluid, which is essential for the baby's protection and development. Severe dehydration can also impact blood volume, making it harder for the heart to pump oxygenated blood to vital organs.

Nutritional deficiencies: Chronic diarrhea can interfere with the absorption of essential nutrients, which are crucial during pregnancy. Malabsorption of nutrients such as vitamins, minerals, and electrolytes can negatively affect fetal development and maternal health.

Preterm labor: In rare cases, severe diarrhea, especially if accompanied by cramping, may indicate preterm labor. While most cases of diarrhea are unrelated to labor, it is important for pregnant women to be aware of this potential risk, particularly if other signs of labor are present.

Infections: Diarrhea caused by bacterial or viral infections can pose additional risks to pregnancy. Infections such as listeriosis or toxoplasmosis can cross the placental barrier and infect the fetus, potentially leading to miscarriage, stillbirth, or preterm birth.

Management of diarrhea during pregnancy

Proper management of diarrhea during pregnancy is crucial to ensure the safety and well-being of both the mother and the baby. Here are several strategies for managing diarrhea:

Stay hydrated: The most important step in managing diarrhea is to stay hydrated. Pregnant women should drink plenty of fluids such as water, clear broths, and oral rehydration solutions to replace lost fluids and electrolytes. Avoid sugary drinks, caffeinated beverages, and alcohol, as these can exacerbate dehydration.

Eat a BRAT diet: The BRAT diet—consisting of bananas, rice, applesauce, and toast—is often recommended for managing diarrhea. These foods are bland, low in fiber, and easy to digest, making them gentle on the digestive system.

Avoid irritating foods: Pregnant women with diarrhea should avoid foods that can irritate the gastrointestinal tract, such as spicy foods, fatty foods, and dairy products if lactose intolerance is suspected. Fried or greasy foods and foods high in sugar can worsen diarrhea symptoms.

Probiotics: Probiotics, found in yogurt and fermented foods, may help restore the balance of healthy bacteria in the gut and alleviate diarrhea. However, it is essential to consult with a healthcare provider before introducing probiotics, especially during pregnancy.

Medications: Over-the-counter anti-diarrheal medications should only be taken under the guidance of a healthcare provider during pregnancy. Some medications may not be safe for use during pregnancy, particularly during the first trimester. In cases where diarrhea is caused by a bacterial infection, antibiotics may be necessary, but the type of antibiotic must be carefully chosen to avoid risks to the fetus.

Consult a healthcare provider: If diarrhea persists for more than 48 hours or is accompanied by symptoms such as fever, severe abdominal pain, blood in the stool, or signs of dehydration, it is essential to seek medical advice promptly. Severe or persistent diarrhea may require further evaluation and treatment.

Rest and reduce stress: Reducing stress and anxiety can help manage diarrhea, especially if the condition is exacerbated by emotional factors. Practicing relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, and gentle prenatal yoga can help alleviate stress-related digestive issues.

Monitor for signs of labor: If diarrhea occurs in the third trimester, particularly if accompanied by contractions or other signs of labor, it is important to monitor for preterm labor. Contacting a healthcare provider in such cases can help ensure that appropriate measures are taken.

When to seek medical attention

Although diarrhea is usually mild and self-limiting during pregnancy, certain situations warrant immediate medical attention:

Diarrhea lasting more than 48 hours

Severe dehydration (dry mouth, decreased urination, dizziness, or dark urine)

High fever (above 100.4°F or 38°C)

Severe abdominal pain or cramping

Blood or mucus in the stool

Signs of preterm labor (regular contractions, lower back pain, or pelvic pressure)

Prompt medical intervention can help prevent complications and ensure a healthy pregnancy.

Conclusion

Diarrhea during pregnancy is common and can be caused by various factors, including hormonal changes, dietary modifications, infections, and stress. While mild cases of diarrhea are usually not harmful, more severe cases can lead to dehydration, nutritional deficiencies, and, in rare instances, preterm labor. Proper management, including staying hydrated, eating a bland diet, and avoiding irritating foods, can help alleviate symptoms. However, if diarrhea persists or is accompanied by more serious symptoms, it is crucial to seek medical advice. By taking appropriate precautions and managing diarrhea effectively, pregnant women can ensure their health and the health of their baby throughout pregnancy. Diarrhea during pregnancy is a multifaceted condition that

requires careful attention due to the unique physiological changes a woman undergoes during this period. While diarrhea is common and often self-limiting, it poses particular challenges in pregnancy because of the potential for dehydration, malnutrition, and electrolyte imbalances, which can have adverse effects on both maternal and fetal health. Identifying the causes of diarrhea, whether they are due to infections, dietary changes, hormonal fluctuations, or underlying conditions like irritable bowel syndrome or inflammatory bowel disease, is crucial to implementing effective management strategies.

While diarrhea during pregnancy is often benign, it requires a careful and tailored approach to ensure both maternal and fetal safety. The condition underscores the importance of timely medical intervention and the role of preventive strategies in safeguarding against potential complications. Understanding the underlying causes, coupled with proper management, can significantly alleviate the burden of this condition, promoting healthier pregnancy outcomes and overall well-being for the mother and child.

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