

Navigating the minefield of what to avoid during pregnancy

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A collective shudder went around the world recently when President Trump took an adventurous step into the world of pregnancy advice, recommending women limit their use of acetaminophen (paracetamol) during pregnancy due to concerns about links with childhood autism (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/2025/09/fact-evidence-suggests-link-between-acetaminophen-autism/>).

For many women the shudder was of distaste at yet further policing of women's bodies and minimisation of their pain. For others, the shudder was of excitement at prominent voices calling into question a pharmaceutical establishment in complete need of an overhaul.

Meanwhile, health professional bodies shuddered at the foreseeable impact of untreated fevers in pregnancy, further wavering levels of childhood immunisation and a growing distrust of the health system. But, for many pregnant women and new parents, their shudder reflected genuine fear and worry for their baby's well-being having utilised the only painkillers widely available to them during pregnancy.

There has been no shortage of subsequent analyses of the evidence related to these recommendations and urgent safety broadcasts from a swathe of health organisations. These kind of assessments (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-09-23/taking-paracetamol-during-pregnancy-does-not-cause-autism/105806092>) are worth reading, if you haven't already, but further scrutiny of the relevant correlations (or lack thereof) is not my aim here.

Regardless of any assurances, what remains for many pregnant women and new parents is an ever-escalating experience of fear and worry as they seek to avoid each substance of potential risk to their baby. Amid the constantly evolving guidelines and anecdotes, the risks faced during pregnancy and infancy are constantly multiplying and their foreboding presence can be felt everywhere you turn.

Back when I was first pregnant a decade or so ago, I remember trying to enjoy a getaway in a little cabin in the Hunter Valley. Yet far too many moments of this 'relaxing' holiday felt entangled with danger. How could I enjoy the spa bath while worrying about accidentally raising my body temperature so high I might risk a miscarriage? How could I enjoy my fancy meal while wondering whether the ricotta cheese had been cooked well enough to be sure it wasn't coming with a side of dangerous food poisoning?

It is of course wise to weigh up the evidence, as we are able, and make careful decisions intended to limit the risks to our children. The use of any medication or intervention is always a balance of benefits versus potential harms. We don't want to be popping Paracetamol for no reason, but that is not the practice of most pregnant women. Untreated fever or pain also has negative impacts on women and babies and, considering the lack of other safe painkillers, this remains a resource for women to turn to as needed. Minimising unnecessary use of medications in pregnancy is definitely a wise course of action, whether it turns out that paracetamol usage in pregnancy significantly impacts fetal neurodevelopment or not.

And yet, as more and more substances or factors during pregnancy have become associated with childhood autism (<https://bmcmmedicine.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12916-024-03617-3>, <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/21/3/244>) avoiding them all completely is simply impossible (as well as quite possibly unnecessary). Pregnancy has the potential to become an unbearable minefield if we attempt complete control of every possible exposure. The reality is that risk and uncertainty are, and have always been, an integral part of the child-bearing experience. The very nature of pregnancy is that of taking on a child we didn't know or choose and then submitting them to our own limited skills, knowledge and capacity regarding how to best care for them in this big old scary world. Bringing a child into the world is a genuinely bold and brave act, which never goes perfectly, but is nonetheless a noble pursuit of self-giving and love.

As a result, it's understandable that feelings of fear or worry emerge throughout pregnancy. These feelings have the intended purpose of ensuring that we treat our babies with care, as each generation is tasked to nurture and nourish the next. Yet there can come a point where our anxiety is so overwhelming that it inhibits our functioning and capacity to nurture. Where this may be the case, many free resources (<https://www.panda.org.au/articles/perinatal-anxiety-and-depression-signs-and-symptoms>) are available to seek understanding and support.

Another layer to the purpose of these kinds of feelings is found in their spiritual potential. The experience of fear and worry in pregnancy is a tangible and confronting reminder that we are not in control. Our responsibility as parents is to do the best that we can to weigh up risks and minimise the harms our children face. It is not to provide them with a life free of risks. That is well and truly beyond our purview. Accepting risks is part of the process of embracing life.

There are some practical things we can do during pregnancy to minimise risks to our baby including watching what we consume or are exposed to, but there are so many more factors further beyond our control. What we can always do to nurture our child is to pray for them.

Our awareness of risks can turn us to humbly rely on God in new ways and perhaps at a level for which we haven't previously felt the need.

'Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you' (1 Pet 5:6–7).

Pregnancy leads us to take the first steps into the experience of learning how to entrust our child to their heavenly father. Our worry and uncertainty can turn us towards humble dependence upon our life-giving God, a God who has embraced the 'risks' involved in giving life to humanity. This practice of entrusting our child to God in the uncertainty of pregnancy sets us up to rely upon and trust him in the unfolding parenting journey ahead. We will go on to worry about the endless risks our toddler invents and whether our teenager will arrive home safely from a party.

We must courageously embrace the risk and uncertainty inherent in the process of embracing life, casting our anxiety on Him who cares for both us and our children. This is an important part of how we love and care for them. We aren't in control, but we do know someone who is.

For safety information regarding medications and other environmental exposures during pregnancy: <https://www.seslhd.health.nsw.gov.au/royal-hospital-for-women/services-clinics/directory/mothersafe>

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