Pregnancy After 50: More Risky Than We Thought?

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“No,” say authors Hamisu Salihu, Lister Hill Scholars Greg Alexander and Russell Kirby and their colleagues. “The aim of this study was to determine whether mothers aged over 50 constitute a unique high-risk group as compared to their younger counterparts. The results from this study suggest that pregnancies to women aged 50 and over pose significant fetal risks.”

Recent advances in assisted reproductive technology have made it possible for women beyond the age of 50 to conceive. It remains unclear, however, what the potential fetal risks are when a woman aged 50 years or older becomes pregnant. “As delayed childbearing continues to increase in our society, this information could provide useful information to both patients and health care providers as they discuss the risks associated with childbearing beyond 50.”

To analyze the fetal outcomes for mothers aged 50 and older, the researchers examined data for all deliveries occurring in the U.S. from 1997 to 1999. Over 12 million records were analyzed for a variety of fetal outcomes, including fetal mortality, low and very low birth weight, preterm and very preterm delivery, and small size for gestational age. Maternal age was grouped into four categories: 20-29, 30-39, 40-49, and 50 years of age or older.

The study found that compared to mothers aged 20-29 years, single births to older mothers had higher risks for all fetal outcome measures. The risks for low birth weight, preterm, and very preterm births were approximately three times higher for older mothers, and the occurrence of very low birth weight, small size for gestational age and fetal mortality were approximately twice as high.

“In general, the risks for adverse pregnancy-related outcomes increased from one maternal age category to the next. However, our findings suggest that women aged 50 and older comprise a distinct high-risk group. Consequently, there is a need to offer older women special counseling both before and after conception so that they are informed of the increased risks involved.”