

A baby's conception and birth can influence dream content in new moms

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The conception and birth of a child are emotional events that influence the dreams of most new mothers. In a surprisingly high number of cases, this influence reflects negative aspects of maternal responsibility, depicting the new infant in dreamed situations of danger and provoking anxiety in the mother that often spills over into wakefulness. Furthermore, these kinds of dreams are also accompanied by complex behaviors by new moms such as motor activity, speaking and expressing emotion, according to a study published in the September 1 issue of the journal SLEEP.

The study, authored by Tore Nielsen, PhD, of the Sleep Research Centre at the Hôpital du Sacré-Cœur de Montréal in Montréal, Québec, Canada, focused on 273 women, who were divided into three groups: postpartum, pregnant, and null gravida. The subjects completed questionnaires about pregnancy and birth factors, personality and sleep, and participated in interviews concerning the prevalence of recent infant dreams and nightmares, associated behaviors, anxiety, depression and other psychopathologic factors.

The following summarizes the results:

-- The percentage of women in all groups who recalled dreams ranged from 88-91 percent.

-- Postpartum and pregnant women recalled infant dreams and nightmares with equal prevalence, but more postpartum women reported

they contained anxiety (75 percent) and the infant in danger (73 percent) than did pregnant women (59 percent).

-- Motor activity was present in twice as many postpartum (57 percent) as pregnant (24 percent) or null gravida (25 percent) women.

-- Expressing emotion was more prevalent among null gravida (56 percent) than postpartum women (27 percent), but was not different from pregnant women (37 percent).

-- Speaking was equally prevalent among the three groups (12-19 percent).

-- Behaviors were associated with nightmares, dream anxiety and, among postpartum women, post-awakening anxiety (41 percent), confusion (51 percent), and a need to check on the infant (60 percent).

“The research has uncovered a new dream phenomenon that affects a surprisingly large number of new mothers (and some fathers) and that therefore broadens our understanding of REM sleep parasomnias in the healthy population,” said Dr. Nielsen. “Hallucinatory baby-in-bed nightmares and other vivid dreams of the baby in peril appear to arise normally in response to the acute maternal responsibilities and sleep fragmentation that are endured by new mothers. The unique experiences constitute a window through which cognitive and emotional processes underlying the earliest steps of mother-infant attachment may be observed.”

A woman’s body goes through drastic changes during and after pregnancy. These changes can be physical, hormonal and emotional. All of these changes can affect a woman’s sleep.

Most pregnant women experience daytime fatigue even though they may

get more sleep. This is because the quality of their sleep tends to be worse. Physical discomfort and awakenings are common. The third trimester tends to be the time when it is hardest to sleep well.

Studies show that snoring often increases during pregnancy. Obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) also may develop as the pregnancy progresses. Warning signs for OSA may become more evident. These include gasping, choking sounds and pauses in breathing. OSA is more likely to develop if a woman had a high body mass index prior to the pregnancy.

Two other sleep disorders that are more common during pregnancy are restless legs syndrome (RLS) and sleep related leg cramps. RLS affects nearly 25 percent of pregnant women. RLS may be related to low iron. Therefore, women who must take iron supplements during pregnancy may have a lower risk of RLS. Leg cramps occur in about 40 percent of pregnant women. They tend to go away after delivery.

Experts recommend that pregnant and postpartum women, as well as other adults, get seven-to-eight hours of sleep each night for good health and optimum performance.

Those who suspect that they might be suffering from a sleep disorder are encouraged to discuss their problem with their primary care physician or a sleep specialist.

Source: American Academy of Sleep Medicine

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