

Having a baby after the age of 40

This information sheet is for mothers having a baby when they are over forty. Please ask questions if you don't understand any information in the leaflet.

Introduction

The age at which women start their families is rising. On average women in England are just over 30 years old when they conceive their first baby but many more women are older. In 2015-16, at the Royal Berkshire Hospital, 1 in 5 babies were born to mothers over 35 years of age and 1 in 50 women were aged over 40 years.

Is there an increased chance of complications?

It has been known for many years that older mothers seem more likely to experience problems in pregnancy and childbirth. However what is unclear is whether the increased chance of complications applies to all pregnant women over 40, or just first time mothers over 40, or just pregnant women over 40 who have a large number of other children or pregnant women over 40 who have additional health problems.

What are the complications and how can these be detected?

Your midwife and GP are trained to care for most healthy pregnant women in their forties however they will refer you to a hospital clinic if they are concerned for either your health or that of your baby.

Women with complex healthcare needs or women whose previous pregnancies or births have been less straightforward will be referred in early pregnancy to the consultants.

All referrals are read promptly. Some mothers can safely be looked after by their midwife after receiving minimal support from the consultant, or tests arranged. Mothers who need hospital care will have appointments sent to them.

The potential problems might include:

- Developing gestational diabetes is approximately four times more likely in mothers over 40 when compared to women in their twenties or early thirties (about 1 in 25 compared to 1 in 100). Your midwife or GP will test your urine for sugar at each antenatal check-up and arrange further tests if sugar is detected.
- Having a very big baby (about 5 in 100 will have a baby over 4.5kg). Your midwife will arrange a scan if the checks she makes on your baby by measuring the 'symphysis-

fundal height' alert her to this possibility. Very big babies are often linked to the mother having gestational diabetes.

- Needing a Caesarean birth for any reason is about twice as likely. It is thought that this may be due to the uterine muscle being less effective, particularly in first time older mothers, so the chance is around 1 in 3 after labour has started. If there are additional concerns, such as a large baby, maternal health problems etc., then you may be advised to have a planned Caesarean birth before labour starts.
- Losing your baby as a stillbirth once 'overdue' is about twice the risk of a younger mother. We advise all mothers to keep an awareness of their baby's movements, and if they change, particularly if they become quiet, ask you to contact us promptly to arrange to be checked over. We also offer all mums aged 40 or over the chance to be induced around their due date, as the risk of stillbirth increases in this age group after 40 weeks. The risk is around the same as that of a woman aged 30 at 42 weeks, which is 1 in 500. For mothers who have had a Caesarean delivery in the past and are hoping to have a vaginal birth in this pregnancy, your midwife should arrange for you to be seen in the hospital clinic at 39-40 weeks to discuss the plan for delivery if your baby has not arrived by your due date. Induction following a previous caesarean section can be offered to most women quite safely, but some of these mothers may need / prefer to have Caesarean section booked if their labour does not start naturally.

Further information / references

1. Induction of Labour at Term in Older Mothers, RCOG, SIP no34, published 2013. Can be seen at https://www.rcog.org.uk/globalassets/documents/guidelines/scientific-impact-papers/sip_34.pdf
2. Advanced Maternal Age and Adverse Pregnancy Outcome: Evidence from a Large Contemporary Cohort. Louise C. Kenny, Lavender, Roseanne, Sinéad M. O'Neill, Tracey Mills, and Ali S. Khashan In PLoS One. 2013; 8(2): e56583.
3. The risks associated with pregnancy in women aged 35 years or older - M. Jolly, N. Sebire, J. Harris, S. Robinson¹ and L. Regan in Human Reproduction, 2000

More information is available on the Trust website: www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

This document can be made available in other languages and formats upon request.

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