- Pregnancy

SCIENCE

WHAT IS MORNING SICKNESS?

Why some pregnancies can cause nausea and vomiting

WORDS AILSA HARVEY

Despite its name, morning sickness can occur at any time of day during pregnancy. However, for many pregnant people, it can feel worse during the morning. The symptoms involve feelings of nausea, being sick or both, and commonly start around four weeks after conception. It's likely to ease or stop completely between weeks 12 and 20. Although it's an unpleasant addition to the early weeks of pregnancy, morning sickness usually doesn't harm a person or their child. But some cases are much more extreme. Severe vomiting during pregnancy, called hyperemesis gravidarum (HG), is more dangerous as it can cause dehydration and malnourishment. The cause of morning sickness comes down to multiple biological changes occurring at once. An influx of pregnancy hormones, blood pressure fluctuations and physical changes to the body are thought to contribute to the queasiness. Stronger scents and tastes can bring about morning sickness. To relieve this, pregnant people can stick to foods with mild flavours, eat small meals regularly, stay hydrated and rest.

SYMPTOM SEVERITY

Around 70 per cent of pregnant people experience morning sickness, but one person's experience can greatly differ from another's. This is largely dictated by the hormone GDF15, which is produced by the embryo or foetus. The more is released, the more nausea the parent will experience. Also, if a pregnant person has encountered more of this hormone before pregnancy, the more resilient to it they're likely to be. People with the inherited blood disorder beta thalassemia usually experience little or no morning sickness. This is because the disorder causes them to have high levels of GDF15 naturally, so their bodies are used to processing the protein.



Processed foods make morning sickness worse for most

EVOLUTIONARY PURPOSE

One theory behind the purpose of morning sickness from an evolutionary perspective is that it protects embryos from exposure to harmful substances in foods. Many feelings of nausea are brought about by strong-tasting vegetables and meat products. These are the most likely foods to contain toxins, and by vomiting a person is less likely to consume pathogen-contaminated products. Harmful microorganisms are far more deadly to the foetus in the early stages of organ development. Encountering contaminated foods in the wild through foraging and hunting was much more likely for our prehistoric ancestors, and expelling potent foods improved the chances of a healthy pregnancy.



Did you know?

Morning sickness is more likely with twins and multiple pregnancies

© Alamy / Shutterstock