PREGNANCY

Dads Matter

NEW RESEARCH SUGGESTS THAT A MAN'S AGE AND LIFESTYLE MAY INFLUENCE HIS CHILDREN'S HEALTH

By Matt McMillen

It's not just about Mom. New research shows that a man's age and lifestyle may have a significant effect on his children's health—well before they are born.

Joanna Kitlinska, PhD, an assistant professor of biochemistry and molecular and cellular biology at Georgetown University, looked at dozens of studies on dads' and children's health. The research she reviewed suggests "that paternal age, lifestyle, and certain exposures can have an impact on children," she says.

Here's how: Age and unhealthy habits cause changes to a man's genes. Although scientists don't yet fully understand how it happens, these changes are then passed on to his kids—perhaps even to his grandchildren. For example, a man's obesity may affect his genes in a way that makes his children more likely to be obese. Or tobacco smoke may damage a man's sperm, allowing it to pass on potentially harmful genes to his children.

Most of the studies were able to show only a link between the two and didn't prove one causes the other. The field requires much more research. Absolute risks of birth defects and other issues remain low for any one child, and researchers still believe the mother's health and habits while pregnant have a much stronger impact on a child's health. Here's a breakdown of what Kitlinska and her colleagues found.

Age
Studies that Kitlinska's team reviewed showed that children whose fathers were older than 40 had a much higher risk of autism than those with fathers younger than 30. Older fathers also tend to have children at greater risk of schizophrenia. No one knows why.

Another study links fathers older than 35 to higher chances for heart problems in their kids as well as birth defects such as Down syndrome.

Diet
Obese men appear to father children who face a higher risk for obesity, diabetes, abnormal metabolism, and certain cancers, perhaps because the father's obesity and poor nutrition cause changes in certain genes directly linked to these conditions.

Alcohol
As many as 3 out of 4 children diagnosed with fetal alcohol spectrum disorders have alcoholic fathers. Children with these disorders may have low birth weight, impaired brain development, and learning disabilities. "With alcohol and many other exposures, it's been believed that it's mainly mothers who influence the children directly," says Kitlinska, whose review challenges that notion.

Practice Healthy Habits
Kitlinska says more research needs to be done before any conclusions can be drawn from this "relatively new field of study." But her work suggests that fathers-to-be should take good care of themselves. That means a healthy diet, regular exercise, limited alcohol, and no smoking.

"It's common sense to have a healthy lifestyle if you are planning to have children," she says.

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