Later in life pregnancy: expecting at 40

Two blue lines appeared and my world changed forever. Was it possible? Could I actually be pregnant at 40? The answer—a clear blue resounding "yes"—illuminated before me in the gym washroom. Pam, a communications consultant living in Toronto, Canada, sheds some light on what to expect when you're expecting at 40.



I've always been considered an "older mom." I was 35 when we had our first son and 37 when our second son arrived. My husband and I discussed a third child the same way some people talk about quitting their job and opening up a bed and breakfast—a fantasy we weren't ever really planning to make reality. We were, as I like to say, sitting on the fence and got pushed over!

I just need to look around my neighbourhood to know I'm part of a growing trend. My first "mommy group" was mostly made up of successful career women in their mid-thirties. The statistics confirm my own reality: in 2008, nearly half of all mothers were over the age of 30 which is about two and a half times greater than it was in 1976.

Why wait?

Every older mom has a different reason for waiting but there are some common threads. Older moms often put education and career before marriage and kids. In our 20s and early 30s we're busy looking for a stable relationship, home ownership and life achievement. For me, I was busy working abroad and enjoying all the experience had to offer. By the time I was ready to settle down with my life partner I was 30. We bought a house at 33 and then started trying to conceive.

There are definitely strong opinions out there about older moms—you just need to browse any message board online to experience it. However, it's a trend I suspect will grow, as women continue to focus on education and career in early adulthood and save parenting for later in life.

The perks of late life motherhood

Undoubtedly, there are many positives to waiting. At 35 I felt more "grounded"—both emotionally and financially. While we're not wealthy, I'm not worried about paying the mortgage, buying groceries or what I'm going to do when I "grow up." I also feel my life experience has helped me carve out a strong identity. Yes, I'm a good mother, but also an established career woman with plenty to offer that doesn't involve diapers, spit-up or nursery rhymes. I know who I am and I believe that this confidence can only benefit my children. Older moms are also more likely to breastfeed for longer and less likely to drink or engage in other "risky" behaviours during pregnancy.

The downside of being "up there"

Statistics can definitely feel like the enemy. "Elderly moms" (yes, this was actually a term used to describe someone like me until it became politically incorrect) have an increased risk for almost every pregnancy complication. If you're lucky enough to get pregnant after 35, you're at greater risk for miscarriage, premature birth, ectopic pregnancy, placenta previa, caesarean section delivery, gestational diabetes and high blood pressure. Plus your baby is more likely to have Down syndrome, chromosomal abnormalities, low birth weight, or experience complications due to a pre-term birth. Yes, the statistics can be frightening, but prenatal screening can go a long way in relieving at least some of these concerns.

Lower energy levels can be another common complaint amongst older parents like me. Pulling an all-nighter in your 20s and then working the next day, while tough, is still manageable. In your late 30s and 40s though, 2 a.m. feedings can feel downright debilitating.

Juggling the needs of aging parents while chasing toddlers and squeezing in a career was also a challenge (and regret) for me. My mom's chronic illness certainly prevented her from fully enjoying her grandkids and sadly, she is no longer here to see her grandchildren grow up or celebrate the arrival of our third.

Being an expectant mom at 40 isn't quite what I expected. It's a little scary and a little strange (especially since I don't really think of myself as particularly "old"). But ultimately, motherhood is an experience I'm looking forward to starting all over again—minus the 2 a.m. feedings of course!

Supporting your loved one's pregnancy

Whether your partner, friend or relative has just announced she's expecting, there are lots of things you can do to support a loved one during one of life's biggest transitions.

Practice patience. Hormone surges and a rapidly changing body can spell mood swings for many expectant moms. If your mate or friend seems to be picking fights over nothing or cries at the drop of a hat, keep your cool and lend a compassionate ear. Remember it's the hormones talking!

Host a shower or gather baby goods. Having a baby requires a lot of costly "equipment" at a time when money can already be a source of stress for an expectant mom. Help out by hosting a baby shower, or collecting hand-me-downs from friends who are done having kids.

Join her at appointments. From blood tests, to check-ups, to ultrasounds: there are seemingly countless appointments to go to during pregnancy. Offer to be there for moral support—especially if your friend or relative is going through the pregnancy alone.

Connect your loved one to resources by researching prenatal courses, drop-in groups and other classes in your neighbourhood. Know someone else who's expecting in your circle of friends? Offer to introduce the moms-to-be to one another. Socializing with other moms is a great source of information and support—especially during the first few months of motherhood.

Pitch in and paint the nursery, do the laundry, run errands, babysit or offer up a foot massage. There's plenty for mom to do before the baby arrives so offer support in any way you can. It will definitely be appreciated!

Interesting to know

- **29.3**: is the average age of Canadian moms at the time of delivery in 2008. In 1975, the average age was 26.7.
- **12.1** of every 1000 births in Canada were delivered by a teenage mother in 2008. In the US this rate was 49.1 teenage births for every 1,000 in 2006.
- An expectant mother's risk of having a child with **Down syndrome** at:
    - **Age 20:** 1 in 1,667
    - **Age 30:** 1 in 952
    - **Age 35:** 1 in 385
    - **Age 40:** 1 in 106