TuSalud

Trump Claims ‘No Downside’ to Avoiding Tylenol During Pregnancy. He’s Wrong.

Untreated fever, particularly in the first trimester, increases the risk of miscarriage, birth defects, and premature birth.

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Obstetricians have long advised their pregnant patients that Tylenol is the safest option to reduce fever or pain. President Donald Trump stood before a national audience on September 22 and contradicted that.

“Don’t take Tylenol,” Trump said during an hourlong White House press conference that included his leading health appointees. “There’s no downside. Don’t take it. You’ll be uncomfortable. It won’t be as easy, maybe, but don’t take it. If you’re pregnant, don’t take Tylenol.”

His advice has no clear basis in research and contradicts long-standing science and medical guidance. And there are downsides to avoiding acetaminophen, the active ingredient in Tylenol, when it is needed. Untreated fever during pregnancy can harm a mom and baby, medical experts warn. Untreated pain is a drawback, too.

Trump’s advice is based on the unproven idea that acetaminophen use during pregnancy increases a child’s risk of autism — a stance that he and Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the longtime anti-vaccine activist who is now Trump’s Health and Human Services secretary, touted throughout the announcement.

Although some studies have found that children exposed to acetaminophen during pregnancy were more likely to have autism symptoms or be diagnosed with autism, other studies found no such association. Association is not the same as causation. That means that research showing an association between Tylenol and autism doesn’t mean the medication caused autism.

The Food and Drug Administration’s September 22 press release on the topic said as much.

“It is important to note that while an association between acetaminophen and neurological conditions has been described in many studies, a causal relationship has not been established and there are contrary studies in the scientific literature,” it said. “It is also noted that acetaminophen

is the only over-the-counter drug approved for use to treat fevers during pregnancy, and high fevers in pregnant women can pose a risk to their children."

The White House declined to provide data showing there are no downsides to avoiding Tylenol use. It provided a statement from White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt in which she cited "a connection" between acetaminophen use during pregnancy and autism as the reason for the guidance.

"The Trump Administration does not believe popping more pills is always the answer for better health," Leavitt said.

Leavitt also shared on the social platform X a statement from Andrea Baccarelli, dean of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, who said his research "found evidence of an association" between prenatal acetaminophen exposure and neurodevelopmental disorders in children. Baccarelli warned of the risks of high fever and advocated for cautious acetaminophen use during pregnancy — not blanket avoidance.

The Risks of Untreated Fever During Pregnancy

Maternal and prenatal care groups, including the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and the Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine, support the use of acetaminophen during pregnancy.

They reiterated this support in response to Trump's remarks.

There's good reason for that: Acetaminophen is one of few safe options pregnant patients have to treat fever and manage pain.

Trump acknowledged this during the press conference.

"Sadly, first question: What can you take instead?" he said. "There's not an alternative." He said that other medicines such as aspirin and Advil "are absolutely proven bad."

In 2020, the FDA advised that nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, or NSAIDs, which include common pain relievers such as Advil (also known as ibuprofen), Aleve (or naproxen), and aspirin shouldn't be used during pregnancy after 20 weeks of gestation.

Those medications aren't recommended during pregnancy because they could harm fetal development, Salena Zanotti, a Cleveland Clinic obstetrician and gynecologist, said this year.

Untreated fevers during pregnancy come with their own risks.

In ACOG's September 22 statement, Steven Fleischman, the association's president, said the Trump administration's anti-Tylenol advice sends a "harmful and confusing message" to pregnant patients.

“Maternal fever, headaches as an early sign of preeclampsia, and pain are all managed with the therapeutic use of acetaminophen, making acetaminophen essential to the people who need it,” Fleischman said.

Christopher Zahn, ACOG’s chief of clinical practice, said pregnant patients should talk with their doctors about the benefits and risks of available treatments. Avoiding treating medical conditions that call for acetaminophen is “far more dangerous than theoretical concerns based on inconclusive reviews of conflicting science,” Zahn said.

Similarly, the Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine said that untreated fever and pain during pregnancy carry “significant maternal and infant health risks.”

“Untreated fever, particularly in the first trimester, increases the risk of miscarriage, birth defects, and premature birth, and untreated pain can lead to maternal depression, anxiety, and high blood pressure,” it said.

Research on these risks goes back more than a decade: A 2014 Pediatrics review of available evidence on fevers during pregnancy found “substantial evidence” that maternal fever might negatively affect fetal health in the short and long term, including increasing the risks of neural tube defects, congenital heart defects, and oral clefts.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also says that fever during pregnancy has been linked to adverse outcomes including birth defects.

MotherToBaby, a nonprofit that provides information about the benefits and risks of medications and other exposures during pregnancy and while breastfeeding, warns that a fever-caused increase in body temperature during early pregnancy carries risks, including a small chance for birth defects. Some studies also found that fevers are associated with increased chances of a child having attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder or autism.

Kenvue, Tylenol’s parent company, said acetaminophen is “the safest pain reliever” option available throughout pregnancy.

“Without it, women face dangerous choices: suffer through conditions like fever that are potentially harmful to both mom and baby or use riskier alternatives,” the company’s statement said. “High fevers and pain are widely recognized as potential risks to a pregnancy if left untreated.”

Tylenol, responding to the news attention on Instagram, cited the ACOG position on acetaminophen use during pregnancy and highlighted a section of the Tylenol label that encourages people who are pregnant or breastfeeding to talk to a health professional.

“Your doctor is the best person to advise whether taking medication is right for you based on your specific health needs,” the video said.

Our Ruling

Trump said “there’s no downside” to avoiding Tylenol use during pregnancy.

Researchers have long documented health risks associated with untreated fevers during pregnancy. They can lead to increased risk of birth defects and other pregnancy complications, particularly in the first trimester. Untreated pain can lead to maternal depression and anxiety. These risks outweigh conflicting research into possible links between the drug and autism, according to maternal and fetal health organizations.

Doctors and researchers have found acetaminophen to be a safe pain and fever reducer during pregnancy. By comparison, other over-the-counter pain relievers come with documented risks, making Tylenol one of the only options available to pregnant mothers.

We rate Trump’s statement Pants on Fire!

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