

Stop nannying us mums-to-be

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LEADER

I'M a bad mother and my baby's not even born. No, I am not a chain-smoking binge drinker but I do enjoy the occasional glass of wine. I drink coffee, eat seafood and, may God call me a sinner, I also wear make-up and go to the hairdressers for a regular cut and colour.

Last week a new report declared that 21st-century living is turning my womb into a toxic wasteland that could leave a horrific legacy for my baby.

The research from a Dutch university, commissioned by Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Fund, claims my blood is swimming with dangerous compounds found in cosmetics, household cleaners, pans and furniture. The chemicals passed through my umbilical cord have been linked to cancer, genital abnormalities and birth defects.

To hear that I could be creating a lifetime of misery for my baby is a terrifying prospect but, short of locking myself away in a bubble with only the purest of oxygen, while my husband spends nine months running an organic farm and preparing all my meals, I'm not entirely sure what the white coats expect me to do.

I am sick to death of the constant scaremongering that pregnant women have to endure.

We are an easy target and a pretty vulnerable group. From the minute you discover you are pregnant, mums-to-be are brainwashed into believing everything we do affects the welfare of our children for better and for worse.

Naturally, I don't want to do anything that will put my child's development and general wellbeing at risk but I find the advice that has been given to me has often been contradictory.

For instance, the Food Standards Agency publishes a long list of things you should avoid eating. Steer clear of peanuts, for example, in case you pass on a lethal nut allergy to your baby. Avoid runny eggs because of salmonella, and soft cheese and mould-ripened cheese because of listeria. We all know heavy drinking and smoking can kill, pregnancy or not. It makes sense.

But I am tired of debating with disapproving mums and fingerwagging health officials whether it is OK to have the occasional alcoholic beverage. Is it safe to eat smoked salmon, mackerel and prawns? Should I really eat red meat or washed salad?

Should I use scented moisturiser, cleaning products, have my hair dyed? Etc, etc. I do not have a blasé attitude to the welfare of my child. I'm as alarmed as the next person by headlines such as Poisoned In The Womb and One Drink Is Too Many For Mums-ToBe but I do think you have to use your common sense, mixed with healthy scepticism, when reading the latest research.

Many of these studies are far from conclusive. Rats are often used in the experiments, for example, so there is no guarantee that we behave in the same way.

And much research has been conducted on small samples. The Dutch researchers conducted their study on 30 newborns and from 40 new mothers.

OK, everything we do or consume and even feel is bound to have some impact on growing children but if we stop to analyse all this and attempt to control it, we'd be driven mad. My mother is utterly baffled by the endless list of dos and don'ts. During her three pregnancies the doctor simply confirmed she had conceived, said she had to give up work at six months and had to attend a few antenatal classes.

She has never smoked, so that was not an issue but there was no restriction on drinking, no foods were off limits and the idea that her furniture could have harmed me and my brothers resulted in a fit of laughter. In my grandmother's day she had to carry her unborn babies during rationing. A balanced diet could not always be guaranteed and yet everyone concerned seemed to survive.

ALSO, I think it is important to remember that in modern life we cannot avoid potential dangers and wrap pregnant women up in cotton wool. It won't be long before scientists find a tenuous link between excessive consumption of chocolate biscuits and childhood obesity.

In fact, an £8million, five-year probe by the EU is being set up to find out whether mums-to-be who overeat are "programming" their unborn babies to become obese.

I, for one, count my blessings that babies are now born healthier and more survive until adulthood than ever before.

There is no way of knowing how many health problems are genetically programmed and beyond our control or the result of our actions in pregnancy.

Some women find the constant stream of research into the impact of maternal behaviour on the foetus provides them with a greater knowledge about how to safeguard their baby's interests.

Personally, I think it heaps on a whole lot of unnecessary guilt.

If all this research genuinely empowered us to be better mothers, without cranking up all those feelings of inadequacy, then it would be useful but remember, we are only human. We all need that odd alcoholic drink to lift our spirits or a bar of chocolate for occasional comfort. Because life is stressful rather than the calm oasis that medical researchers maintain it should be.

Women do not exist just for the sake of making babies. They live with the stresses of modern life and inevitably they pass some of that on to their children.

Personally, I don't think that makes me a bad mother. I'm just trying to do my best.