

Mature moms offer insight on later-in-life parenting

By VIRGINIA JUSTICE

Geriatric, older, advanced maternal age, elderly — these terms conjure thoughts of, well, grandparents in a nursing home. In reality, these terms are all used to describe pregnant women over the age of 30.

If society views “older moms” in a different light are these terms warranted? Are the risks to moms over 30 or 35 any greater than those for younger mothers? To learn the pros and cons of being an older parent, we asked some Eastern Oregon mothers, 35 and up, to share their experiences.

Pregnancies vary between women; however, those conceiving after 35 typically experience increased testing and monitoring by doctors. According to the March of Dimes, women over 35 are more likely to have complications such as premature birth, gestational diabetes, high blood pressure, increased incidence of birth defects and births of multiples. It’s important to note that many of these complications are also of concern in younger mothers. So is being an older mom a detriment?

Of the 11 women interviewed, three had some issues that doctors attributed to age — one mother became pregnant with twins. Seven women had full-term pregnancies without complications and one mom, Marie Hancock of Pendleton, is eight weeks along, doing very well, and no problems are anticipated with her pregnancy. Nearly all indicated that their doctors monitored their pregnancies more and in a few instances suggested additional testing. Delores Doherty McLaren, who gave birth at 38, recalls, “The doctor wanted to do an amniocentesis, I said no. With

a previous pregnancy five years earlier it was not offered.”

According to the American Diabetes Association, incidence of gestational diabetes increases with age, particularly in those



35 and over, though this is treatable and typically disappears after delivery. Birth defects, which can be broadly defined, are also age-related, but incidence remains low. For instance, in mothers aged 25, Down Syndrome occurs about once every 1,200 births; at 35, that rate is around 1 in 300.

Many local women have had children after 35, though several began families in their 20s. Almost all said that being older had a few challenges but also many positives. The most frequent concern for older parents was fatigue, knowing their energy level was not that of a 20-something. Rita Marquez of Pendleton says raising a child after age 35 is tiring, just as it is for any new mom. “But I feel that you have a better outlook on it and more patience because, through life, other stressors and life experiences give the tools to cope easier with the situation. And for me, I have a

greater appreciation for even the not-so-pleasant parts of parenting.”

Peggy LaVallee Ruiz of Pendleton, who had twins after age 35, was placed on bed rest at 22 weeks and was flown by Life Flight to Port-

land at 31 weeks. The twins were born five weeks early and one has been diagnosed with Asperger’s, a form of autism. Peggy notes, “I had [previously] experienced full-term births. ... I think I would have been pretty freaked out about the preemie issues and the autism if they had been my first babies.”

None of the moms I talked with expressed regret about having a child after age 35. Several noted they are more relaxed and, as Rita Marquez observes, older parents have their priorities better lined up than younger moms, who may still be growing up while raising a family.

Ree Adams Doherty thinks each age has its benefits. She’s more financially secure now but hangs out less with friends. Amy Wetherill Word expresses concern that she may not be as much fun, but notes, “I am probably calmer than I was. I’ve learned to take the time to



Strategies

evaluate the situation and not get worked up about it.”

Many of these older moms also indicated that due to their age they feel like better parents because they stress manners, respect and other things that create productive citizens. Most felt this was due to being from a different generation. Asked if they felt their children benefit from their maturity the resounding answer was yes, although some pointed out social stigmas.

Jennifer Rowden of Hermiston says her older children were teens and early twenties when her last child was born and sometimes get embarrassed when people assume her youngest belongs to one of them. Tami Shaffer-Pelles feels her son does benefit — except when other parents mistake us for his grandparents, she laughs. Lorie Phillips Case says she also used to get the “grandma or mom?” inquiry. “I was at Walmart when the greeter asked me this question. I went directly to the hair dye section and my husband helped me dye my gray hair that evening.”

The decision to have a child, regardless of age, is a very personal one. Society may have some issues with women perceived as older having children. But the moms I interviewed were happy with their choice.

Home economist Virginia Justice holds an education degree. The Pendleton resident and her husband have two college-aged daughters.