

A narrative review of Couvade syndrome: The surprising Symptoms of Sympathetic Pregnancy

Mrs. Shreya Vaz,¹ Mrs. Suma L²

¹Assistant Professor, ²Professor

^{1,2}Dept of Obstetrics & Gynecological Nursing, Shridevi College of Nursing, Tumkur

Abstract

Couvade syndrome occurs when expectant fathers experience psychological and somatic symptoms typical of pregnancy. Common somatic symptoms include gastrointestinal problems, toothache, heartburn, fatigue and back pain, while anxiety is the most commonly reported psychological symptom. Symptoms typically manifest during the first trimester of the partner's pregnancy, decrease or disappear during the second trimester, increase during the third trimester, and usually resolve after delivery. The aetiology of Couvade's syndrome remains unclear, with psychoanalytic theories suggesting paternal anxiety and feelings of marginalisation. Hormonal changes, including increased cortisol, estradiol, prolactin and decreased testosterone levels during the third trimester, are also thought to be contributing factors. The findings highlight the need for better understand this phenomenon and its impact on family dynamics during pregnancy.

Keywords Couvade syndrome, sympathetic pregnancy, Couvade

1. Introduction

Pregnancy and the transition to parenthood is a major developmental period. The transition to parenthood differs in times and ways between father and mother. Couvade syndrome is a condition in which men begin to experience abnormal symptoms that can mirror the symptoms of their pregnant mate. This may seem like a joke, but it's no laughing matter. It can be very distressing for men to experience pregnancy symptoms while their partner is pregnant. Couvade is almost always temporary and not serious. It may be caused by stress, empathy, or hormonal changes in expecting dads.

What does Couvade syndrome mean?

The name couvades come from the French word "couvee," which means "to hatch" or "to brood, incubate". Couvade syndrome, sometimes called sympathetic pregnancy, the expectant mothers partner has symptoms that uncannily mimic pregnancy both psychological and somatic symptoms typical of pregnancy. Though Couvade syndrome isn't a recognized disease or mental illness, studies suggests that it may be common. More research is needed to learn what's behind it.

2. History

Couvade is a term 1st coined by anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor in 1865 to describe the child expectancy habits that he had observed that men mimicked the pain their partner experienced during labor/breast feeding among primitive communities.

Research has indicated that couvades syndrome is a relatively common phenomenon. However, it is not recognized as an official medical or psychological issue.

What causes Couvade syndrome?

Several different explanations have been proposed for Couvade syndrome. These include:

Psychological factors:

- May be caused by a man's anxiety or insecurity about becoming a father.
- They may feel that they are no longer the primary focus of their family or partner's attention.

Biological factors:

- May be caused by changes in a man's hormone levels during pregnancy. This includes an increase in certain hormones, such as prolactin or a decrease in testosterone.
- Stress is one of the reasons which cause decreased testosterone.

Social factors:

- Couvades syndrome may be related to a man's social role. For example, if he feels excluded from the experience or feels like he is taking on a traditional female role, he may experience the symptoms of Couvades syndrome.

What could be the risk factors for Couvades syndrome?

Though the risk factors of the Couvades syndrome are not well known, some factors could increase the risk of Couvades syndrome. They are,

- Lower socioeconomic status
- Becoming to be a father for the first time
- Greater emotional involvement in child birth due to past traumas
- Man belongs to certain ethnic minority groups.

What are the signs and symptoms?

The most of the 1 time expectant fathers experienced physical, psychological and behavioral symptoms. It include,

- Physical symptoms: physical symptoms were related to gastrointestinal disturbance such as changes in appetite either increased or decreased or with some man's experiencing alternatively, constipation, flatulence, indigestion, weight gain, swelling of ankles and feet, toothache, nausea, diarrhea and abdominal pain in varying degrees and duration.
- Psychological symptoms: Psychological ones were less common and include insomnia, mood irritability and night mares. Anxiety, Insomnia appeared to be linked to other symptoms such as tiredness and lethargy or pregnancy-related worries and demands.
- Behavioral symptoms: it includes impaired concentration, disturbed sleep, appetite changes, increased smoking and drinking, craving for specific foods, anxiety etc...

What is the treatment?

There is no standard specific treatment recommended for couvades syndrome because syndrome almost always goes away after the baby is born. This can be managed by following simple measures:

- Engaging in stress-relieving activities
- Exercising regularly

- Getting extra diet
- Eating a balanced diet
- Avoiding alcohol and drugs
- What are the alternative therapies?
- Couvade syndrome will be treated by using psychological interventions, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), to address symptoms of anxiety and depression.
- Other therapies like yoga and medications will also help to relieve some symptoms of couvade syndrome.

When will Couvade syndrome go away?

Fortunately, Couvade is almost always temporary and not serious. And while there's no magic pill to get rid of syndrome, symptoms can persist in men until the baby is born.

3. Conclusion

Couvade syndrome, also called sympathetic pregnancy, or “pregnant dad syndrome,” is a situation, where the father experiences somatic and/ or psychiatric symptoms during his wife s pregnancy. Couvade syndrome is normal for the expectant fathers to experience some discomforts during their wife’s pregnancy and it is not considered an illness.

It is advised that the man try to relax, having a balanced diet, avoid consuming drugs and alcohol, exercise regularly, and engage in stress relief techniques can help to alleviate symptoms.

References

1. Wdowiak K, Maciocha A, Wąż J. Couvade Syndrome: History and Current Perspectives. Journal of Psychosexual Health. 2025;0(0). doi:10.1177/26318318251343403
2. http://www.babycenter.com/0_strange-but-true-couvade-syndrome-sympathetic-pregnancy_10364940.bc
3. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/6751709.stem>
4. Nightingale Nursing Times, A window for health in action, vol XIX no. 2 May 2023.
5. International Journal of Nursing Education and Research 3(3): July - September 2015
6. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Couvade_syndrome
7. <https://syndrome.org/couvade-syndrome>