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Sleep and Its Relationship with Gestational Diabetes Mellitus

Zeinab Mohamed Omar Saqr[1], Yousef Abo-Elwan[2], Nora Nabil Hussien[1], Nahla Ashraf Zaitoun[1]

[1] Family Medicine Department, Faculty of Medicine, Zagazig University

[2] Obstetrics and Gynecology Department, Faculty of Medicine, Zagazig University

***Corresponding author:** Zeinab Mohamed Omar Saqr

Email: zmomer@medicine.zu.edu.eg

Abstract:

Gestational Diabetes Mellitus (GDM) is a condition characterized by glucose intolerance with onset or first recognition during pregnancy. Emerging research highlights that sleep disturbances during pregnancy may significantly contribute to the risk of developing GDM.

Keywords: Sleep, Gestational Diabetes mellitus, pregnancy.

Introduction:

Gestational Diabetes Mellitus (GDM) is a significant health concern during pregnancy, affecting both maternal and fetal well-being. Recent studies have begun to explore the intricate relationship between sleep patterns—both in terms of quality and duration—and the risk of developing GDM. While factors like age, obesity, and genetics have long been recognized as primary risk factors, the impact of sleep is emerging as a key variable **(1, 2).**

While traditional risk factors for GDM—such as advanced maternal age, obesity, family history of diabetes, and ethnicity—are well-established, recent research suggests that sleep quality and duration may also play a significant role in its development **(3**).

Sleep disturbances, including short sleep duration (<6 hours per night), poor sleep quality, and obstructive sleep apnea (OSA), have been linked to metabolic dysfunction and insulin resistance. The mechanisms linking poor sleep and GDM include: Neuroendocrine dysfunction: Disrupted sleep affects insulin secretion and glucose metabolism, Increased inflammation: Chronic sleep deprivation leads to elevated pro-inflammatory markers such as IL-6, TNF-α, and CRP, which contribute to insulin resistance, Dysregulated circadian rhythms: Altered melatonin secretion impacts glucose metabolism and insulin sensitivity **(4)**.

Mechanisms of Sleep Disruption in Pregnancy:

Hormonal Changes: Pregnancy involves significant hormonal fluctuations, including increased progesterone and estrogen levels, which can affect sleep. Progesterone, in particular, is known to have sedative effects, but it can also disrupt the quality of sleep, leading to fragmentation and reduced restorative sleep **(5)**.

Physical Discomfort: As pregnancy progresses, physical discomfort such as back pain, frequent urination, and changes in the position of the fetus can interfere with sleep. Sleep disturbances during pregnancy are common, with up to 80% of pregnant women reporting some form of sleep disruption **(6)**.

Psychological Factors: Anxiety, stress, and depression are common during pregnancy and have been linked to poor sleep. Given that emotional well-being is closely tied to sleep quality, these psychological factors may exacerbate the risk of GDM, especially when combined with sleep deprivation **(7).**

Sleep and risk of GDM

There are several physiological pathways through which inadequate or disrupted sleep may increase the risk of GDM:

I. **Insulin Sensitivity and Glucose Metabolism:** Sleep deprivation is known to impair insulin sensitivity, leading to insulin resistance, which is a key characteristic of GDM. Studies have shown that both acute and chronic sleep restriction can alter glucose metabolism, causing increased blood sugar levels. The mechanisms involved include altered hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis function, increased cortisol levels, and changes in the autonomic nervous system **(1, 8).**

II. **Cortisol:** Cortisol, a stress hormone, follows a circadian rhythm, rising in the early morning and falling throughout the day. However, disrupted sleep or sleep deprivation can cause an abnormal cortisol response, leading to elevated cortisol levels, which interfere with insulin action and promote insulin resistance **(8).**

III. **Melatonin:** Melatonin, the hormone responsible for regulating the sleep-wake cycle, also plays a role in glucose metabolism. Disrupted sleep patterns can interfere with melatonin production, potentially impairing insulin sensitivity and increasing the risk of GDM **(9).**

IV. **Inflammation:** Poor sleep, particularly in the form of sleep deprivation or sleep disorders like sleep apnea, can trigger an inflammatory response. Chronic inflammation is known to contribute to insulin resistance and impaired glucose tolerance, both of which are implicated in GDM. Increased levels of inflammatory cytokines such as C-reactive protein (CRP), interleukin-6 (IL-6), and tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α) have been observed in individuals with poor sleep quality **(10)**.

V. **Sympathetic Nervous System Activation:** Sleep disturbances are associated with increased sympathetic nervous system (SNS) activity. The SNS is involved in the "fight or flight" response and, when chronically activated, can contribute to the development of insulin resistance. The increased release of catecholamines (like adrenaline) in response to poor sleep may directly interfere with insulin signaling pathways, thereby promoting GDM **(2).**

Consequences of GDM and Poor Sleep:

Both Gestational Diabetes Mellitus (GDM) and poor sleep quality can have significant consequences for both the mother and the fetus, and when these two factors coexist, the potential risks and complications may be compounded.

1. Maternal Health Consequences:

Increased Risk of Type 2 Diabetes (T2D): Women who have had GDM are at a higher risk of developing Type 2 diabetes later in life. Studies indicate that up to 50% of women with GDM will develop T2D within 10 to 20 years after delivery. Poor sleep can exacerbate this risk by further impairing insulin sensitivity, which contributes to the development of metabolic disorders **(11).**

Cardiovascular Disease: Both GDM and poor sleep have been independently associated with an increased risk of cardiovascular diseases. GDM increases the risk of hypertension and preeclampsia during pregnancy, and women with a history of GDM are more likely to develop heart disease post-pregnancy. Poor sleep can also contribute to hypertension and increased sympathetic nervous system activity, both of which further elevate the cardiovascular risk **(1, 12).**

Mental Health Issues: Sleep disturbances during pregnancy, combined with the metabolic stress caused by GDM, can increase the likelihood of developing mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, and postpartum mood disorders. Poor sleep can exacerbate the emotional and psychological stress women experience, making it more difficult to manage the demands of pregnancy and recovery **(7)**.

Complications During Labor: Women with poorly managed GDM are at greater risk of complications during labor, including increased need for cesarean sections, prolonged labor, and postpartum hemorrhage. Poor sleep can add to

this risk by affecting hormonal regulation, such as the release of oxytocin, which is important for uterine contractions and the initiation of labor **(13).**

2. Fetal Health Consequences:

Increased Risk of Macrosomia: One of the most significant risks associated with GDM is fetal macrosomia (excessive birth weight). High maternal blood glucose levels lead to increased fetal insulin production, which promotes excessive growth. Macrosomia can result in birth complications, including shoulder dystocia, which may cause physical injury to the baby during delivery. Poor sleep can amplify this risk by exacerbating metabolic dysfunction in the mother, leading to further elevations in blood glucose levels **(8, 14)**.

Preterm Birth: Both GDM and sleep disturbances are associated with an increased risk of preterm birth. GDM can alter the normal development of the placenta and disrupt hormonal regulation necessary for maintaining pregnancy. Inadequate sleep, particularly during the later stages of pregnancy, can increase stress and inflammation, which may induce premature labor **(9, 15).**

Respiratory Distress Syndrome: Infants born to mothers with GDM are at a higher risk of respiratory distress syndrome (RDS), a condition where the newborn's lungs are not fully developed. GDM can affect lung maturity due to alterations in fetal insulin levels, and poor maternal sleep may further impact fetal development, potentially exacerbating this risk **(16).**

Hypoglycemia After Birth: Newborns of mothers with GDM often experience hypoglycemia shortly after birth. The excess insulin produced in response to high maternal blood glucose levels can cause the baby's blood sugar to drop. Sleep disturbances and poor sleep quality in the mother may also influence the hormonal regulation of glucose metabolism in both the mother and fetus, potentially worsening this outcome **(10, 17)**.

Increased Risk of Childhood Obesity and Metabolic Disorders: Children born to mothers with GDM are at an increased risk of developing obesity, Type 2 diabetes, and metabolic syndrome later in life. This risk is compounded if the mother experiences poor sleep during pregnancy. Evidence suggests that disrupted maternal sleep can negatively impact the fetal programming of metabolic pathways, potentially increasing the child's susceptibility to these conditions **(2, 8)**.

3. Long-Term Consequences for Maternal and Fetal Health:

Impact on Long-Term Health of the Mother: Women who experience both GDM and poor sleep during pregnancy are more likely to face long-term health challenges. In addition to the increased risk of Type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease, they may also experience challenges related to weight management and metabolic syndrome. Chronic sleep deprivation can further exacerbate these conditions by negatively affecting appetite regulation, increasing stress, and disrupting hormonal balance **(18).**

Transgenerational Effects: The effects of poor maternal sleep and GDM may extend to the next generation. Children of mothers with GDM are at higher risk of developing GDM themselves later in life. Furthermore, maternal sleep disturbances may disrupt fetal programming in ways that increase the risk of chronic conditions such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease in the offspring. This creates a cycle that can perpetuate poor health outcomes across generations **(8, 19).**

Mechanisms Behind the Combined Effects of GDM and Poor Sleep:

Inflammation: Both GDM and poor sleep are associated with heightened levels of systemic inflammation. GDM itself is a state of low-grade inflammation, and poor sleep further exacerbates this inflammatory response. Elevated inflammatory markers like C-reactive protein (CRP) and interleukin-6 (IL-6) are implicated in both the pathophysiology of GDM and the systemic effects of sleep deprivation. This chronic inflammation increases the risk

of maternal complications such as preeclampsia, as well as fetal complications such as growth restriction or excessive growth **(20).**

Endocrine Disruption: Sleep disruptions can lead to imbalances in several hormones involved in glucose metabolism, including cortisol, leptin, and ghrelin. Cortisol, when chronically elevated due to poor sleep, can interfere with insulin signaling and exacerbate the insulin resistance seen in GDM. Additionally, poor sleep can disrupt circadian rhythms, further compromising metabolic regulation and insulin sensitivity **(2).**

Autonomic Nervous System Dysregulation: Chronic poor sleep leads to sympathetic nervous system overactivation, which has been shown to impair glucose metabolism and increase the risk of insulin resistance. In the context of GDM, this dysregulation can further hinder glucose control, leading to higher maternal blood sugar levels and increasing the likelihood of complications **(21).**

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