

Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Use During Pregnancy

The use of alcohol, tobacco and/or other drugs (ATOD) during pregnancy is the leading preventable cause of mental, physical and psychological impairments and problems in infants and children. When a pregnant woman uses ATOD, the substances pass to the fetus through the placenta. Breastfeeding women pass the substances they are using to their infants through breast milk.

Alcohol

- Alcohol is one of the most dangerous drugs for pregnant women, especially in the early weeks. Alcohol is a teratogen, or substance that causes cell death and birth defects.
- Drinking during pregnancy increases the risk of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD), whose effects range from abnormal facial features and other physical deformities to learning disabilities, hyperactivity and poor motor skills.
- It has not been determined that there is any safe level of drinking for pregnant women.

Tobacco

- Smoking during pregnancy often causes the fetus to develop more slowly, resulting in babies with low birthweights. Low-birthweight babies are 20 times more likely to die in their first month of life than normal-weight babies.
- Risks of miscarriage and premature labor appear to be higher, and recent reports have also linked smoking with birth defects.

Illegal Drugs

Using illegal drugs while pregnant is dangerous both because of the direct effects of drugs on the developing fetus, and because women under the influence have impaired judgment and may make poor choices that put their own and their baby's health at risk.

Marijuana

- Smoking marijuana while pregnant can affect your baby's growth and the development of his nervous system. Studies have shown that children who were exposed to marijuana during pregnancy sometimes have poor focusing and problem-solving abilities.

PCP and LSD

- Low birthweight, poor muscle control and brain damage are all possible in infants who were exposed to PCP and LSD in the womb.
- Newborns may show signs of intoxication for a few days after birth, and go through withdrawal symptoms such as lethargy and tremors.

Stimulants

- **Cocaine, crack, methamphetamine, Ecstasy and prescription amphetamines** stimulate the central nervous system and cause increased heart rate and blood

- pressure. The added stress on the baby's system may cause slower growth, and mothers are more likely to experience bleeding, miscarriage and premature labor.
- Cocaine and other stimulant use may also cause placental abruption, a condition where the placenta pulls away from the uterus before labor begins. This causes extensive bleeding and can be fatal for both mother and child.
- Babies who were regularly exposed to these drugs in the womb:
- Often have birth weights of 5 ½ pounds or less.
- Tend to have smaller heads, which generally indicates smaller brains.
- Face an increased risk of mental retardation and cerebral palsy.
- Are often jittery, irritable, and withdraw and cry when they are touched.
- Withdrawal symptoms suffered by infants born dependent on stimulants include tremors, sleeplessness, muscle spasms and sucking difficulties.

Heroin & Other Opiates

- Nearly half of pregnant women abusing heroin, morphine and painkillers suffer from:
 - Anemia
 - Pneumonia
 - Diabetes
 - Hepatitis
 - Heart disease
- Women abusing opiates have more spontaneous abortions, premature births and still births, and injecting mothers put their babies at risk for HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.
- Babies are often born dependent on the drug and must suffer withdrawal symptoms, such as irritability, vomiting, diarrhea and joint stiffness.
- Pregnant women are generally referred to methadone treatment, as the withdrawal from stopping opiates can cause miscarriage.

A parent's alcohol, tobacco and other drug (ATOD) use can be harmful to a child even after she is born. Further contact with the drug through breast milk occurs when a new mother nurses while abusing ATOD. Parents using alcohol and drugs may place their habit before the needs of their newborn, resulting in neglect. In addition, caring for a drug-affected baby can be overwhelming, which may lead to mistreatment.

If you're a pregnant woman using alcohol, tobacco or other drugs, get help so you can stop. Most treatment programs save openings just for pregnant women. Call Compass Mark at (717) 299-2831 for non-judgmental information on how to find and pay for treatment.

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