Cigarette Smoking and Pregnancy

In every pregnancy, a woman starts out with a 3-5% chance of having a baby with a birth defect. This is called her background risk. This sheet talks about whether exposure to cigarette smoking may increase the risk for birth defects above that background risk. This information should not take the place of medical care and advice from your healthcare professional.

**What is in cigarette smoke?**

Cigarette smoke contains over 4,000 chemicals and toxins including nicotine, tar, arsenic, lead, carbon monoxide and at least 40 known cancer-causing agents. Several of these chemicals and toxins cross the placenta and decrease the amount of oxygen and nutrients available for a developing baby and can have a direct harmful effect on the baby.

**Can smoking cigarettes make it more difficult for me to become pregnant?**

Yes. Some studies report it can take longer and be more difficult to get pregnant for women who smoke compared to non-smokers. These effects on fertility appear to go away once a woman stops smoking.

**Can cigarette smoking put me at a higher risk for miscarriage?**

Yes, Some studies have observed an increased risk of miscarriage in women who smoke cigarettes. Smoking cigarettes can change how blood flows through the placenta (the blood connection the mother shares with the baby), which can lead to a higher risk of miscarriage. Several studies also report a higher risk of ectopic pregnancy, a very serious complication where the developing embryo grows outside of the uterus (usually in the fallopian tubes).

**Can smoking cigarettes during my pregnancy cause a birth defect?**

Possibly. Some studies have report a small increased risk of an oral cleft in newborns, especially if there is a history of this in the family. An oral cleft occurs when the lip or palate (roof of the mouth) does not fully close during development.

Most studies have not found an increase in other birth defects with cigarette smoking in pregnancy. However, a few studies have suggested a small increased risk for a variety of birth defects. At this time, there is not enough information to know if smoking in pregnancy is associated with an increased risk for these other birth defects.

**Can cigarette smoking have other harmful effects on a pregnancy?**

Yes. Newborns of mothers who smoked cigarettes during pregnancy are at an increased risk of being born prematurely (before 37 weeks gestation) or at a low birth weight. Also, a variety of serious complications in the pregnancy or delivery have been associated with cigarette smoking during pregnancy. These complications include placenta previa (placenta blocks the birth canal), placental abruption (placenta breaks away from the uterine wall early causing risk of maternal and fetal death), bleeding and stillbirth.

A baby born prematurely is at a higher risk for many health problems. A premature baby may need to stay in the hospital for several weeks in an intensive care unit. Low birth weight can also decrease the newborn’s ability to recover from serious health problems.

Women who stop smoking early in pregnancy can reduce their risk of having a baby with low birth weight to that of a non-
smoking woman. It is also thought that reducing the amount of cigarettes you smoke may lower the risk of having a baby that is low birth weight or premature.

**Can cigarette smoking during pregnancy lead to lung problems for the baby?**

Yes. Newborns of mothers who smoke during pregnancy have a higher risk of asthma, bronchitis and respiratory infections during childhood. Smoking during pregnancy may also be associated with a higher risk of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).

**If I continue to smoke cigarettes at the end of my pregnancy, can it cause my baby to experience withdrawal after birth?**

Possibly. Withdrawal symptoms, such as irritability, increased muscle tone (rigid muscles), and tremors, have been observed in newborns exposed to cigarette smoking during the last weeks of pregnancy. These symptoms are temporary and usually disappear without medical treatment.

**Can cigarette smoking during pregnancy have any long-term effects on the child’s behavior or development?**

Possibly. Several studies have found a link between cigarette smoking in pregnancy and learning and behavior problems in children. For example, there is a possible association with a higher risk of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). More studies are needed to confirm these findings.

**I smoke only five cigarettes a day. Is this still a problem?**

The risk of many pregnancy complications linked with cigarette smoking depends on the number of cigarettes a woman smokes. The less you smoke, the less you and your baby are at risk of having problems. If you cannot stop smoking, lowering the number of cigarettes you smoke per day will have benefits for you and the baby. However, even a few cigarettes a day lessens the amount of nutrients and oxygen your baby gets. It is best to stop smoking altogether, as early in pregnancy as possible.

**I am 28 weeks pregnant and I have been smoking cigarettes for all of my pregnancy. Is it too late to quit smoking?**

No. It is never too late to stop smoking cigarettes. Stopping at any time during pregnancy can still have a positive effect on the growth and development of your baby.

**Are there any resources or medical treatments available to help me to quit smoking during my pregnancy?**

Yes. The best method to stop smoking during pregnancy is without the use of medication. For free advice, support and referrals, please call the Smoker’s Quitline at 1-800-QUIT-NOW (1-800-784-8669) from anywhere in the U.S. There are also online resources to help you quit smoking in your pregnancy like [www.tobacco-cessation.org/PDFs/NeedHelpBooklet.pdf](http://www.tobacco-cessation.org/PDFs/NeedHelpBooklet.pdf). Tell your family about your goal to quit so they can be there for you. These are just a few examples of the many ways that you can get help to quit.

If it does not seem possible to stop smoking without a medical treatment, you should discuss your options with your healthcare provider.

**Can I smoke cigarettes when I am breastfeeding?**

The best and safest approach is to not smoke while breastfeeding. Nicotine is found in breast milk and could affect your baby. Your baby may also be exposed to other unhealthy chemicals from cigarettes that could cross into the breast milk.

Despite these risks, it is still thought that the benefits of breastfeeding outweigh the risks of cigarette smoking for most babies. If you cannot stop smoking completely, you should reduce the number you smoke as much as possible and avoid smoking when you are near the baby. Be sure to talk to your health care provider about all your options for breastfeeding.

**Is there a concern if my partner is smoking cigarettes?**
Men who smoke may have lower sperm counts, as well as abnormal shape and movement of sperm, which may make it harder for you to become pregnant. Once you are pregnant, your partner should ideally stop smoking or avoid smoking near you since a lower birth weight has been seen in babies of women exposed to their partner’s smoke.

For more information, please see the OTIS fact sheet Paternal Exposures and Pregnancy.

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Selected References:


If you have questions about the information on this fact sheet or other exposures during pregnancy, call OTIS at 1-866-626-6847.