



Pick Your Path to Health

Why Smoking Hurts Your Baby

Now that you're pregnant, it's time to give yourself the best care in the world. You can put your bad habits on hold, have regular prenatal checkups, eat healthy foods, get the proper rest, exercise, and take prenatal vitamins. Even some women who smoke are able to muster up the strength to quit while pregnant.

But what happens when a pregnant woman decides to continue smoking?

The baby suffers.

Each time a pregnant mother takes a drag from a cigarette, fetal breathing movements—a sign of a healthy fetus—are reduced within five minutes.

Women who smoke while pregnant are also at increased risk for:

- ectopic pregnancy and spontaneous abortion,
- premature rupture of membranes,
- the placenta separating from the uterus,
- abnormal location of the placenta, which can cause massive hemorrhaging during delivery and
- preterm delivery.

Infants born to women who smoke during pregnancy have lower than average birth weight and are more likely to be small for their age, and low birth weight is associated with increased risk for death. The longer the mother smokes during pregnancy, the greater the effect on the infant's weight. The risk for sudden infant death syndrome is also higher for offspring of women who smoke during pregnancy.

And it doesn't stop there. Another study shows that children exposed to tobacco smoke in the womb are more likely to get asthma and suffer from other serious diseases. Researchers found an 80 percent increase in the prevalence of asthma among children exposed to tobacco smoke in the womb.

There is some good news, however. Smoking during pregnancy is on the decline. In 1999, just over 12 percent of women reported smoking while pregnant, according to a new report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This represents a 33 percent drop since 1990. But this still

means that almost a half million women, mostly young women, are still smoking while pregnant.

Approximately 13 percent of African American women smoke while pregnant. Since more than 65 percent of African Americans are more likely to smoke menthol cigarettes, they may be exposing their unborn babies to more nicotine than the average smoker. According to researchers at Ohio State University, women who smoke menthol cigarettes are more likely to inhale deeper with each drag and potentially take in more nicotine. The study also found that menthol smokers usually smoke their first cigarette of the day sooner than non-menthol smokers, which tends to indicate a higher level of dependency. Though African American women smoked fewer cigarettes than white women, they had higher levels of nicotine.

The harm caused by nicotine exposure during pregnancy does not end once the baby is born. Researchers at Columbia University in New York City have found that girls whose mothers smoked during pregnancy are at much greater risk than other children for drug abuse and boys have increased risk for conduct disorder. Other studies show that mothers who smoke during pregnancy increase the risk that their daughters will smoke as adolescents. In addition, prenatal exposure to smoking has been linked to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

There have also been reports linking smoking to undiagnosed mental illness. According to researchers at St. Louis University in Missouri, women who continue to smoke after they know they are pregnant may be more likely to be mentally ill than non-smoking women. About 61 percent of the women in this study were African American and all participated in the federal Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutritional supplementation program.

For women who cut back on smoking, thinking the effect will be less detrimental to the fetus, that assumption is wrong. According to a study conducted by researchers at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, birth weight declined sharply even for those smoking one to eight cigarettes a day and leveled off at more than eight cigarettes per day.

The good news is that quitting at any time during pregnancy benefits the baby-especially before the third trimester. Studies show that infants of women who stop smoking in the first trimester are comparable with those of nonsmokers' infants.

Quitting by far is the best for both the mother and the baby. And for those who are unable to do it on their own, researchers at the Mayo Clinic say nicotine patches are safe and effective for use by pregnant women under the supervision of a physician. The study found that the nicotine delivered by the patch was no greater than that of a cigarette, but without the carbon monoxide and other toxins caused by cigarettes.

Give yourself and your unborn child an opportunity to breathe easier. Quit today and you will be on a path to better health.

Where to Turn for Help

- National Women's Health Information Center; (800) 994-WOMAN, TDD at (888) 220-5446 or <http://www.4woman.gov/QuitSmoking/index.cfm>
- The American Cancer Society Action Network; (877) 234-4484.
- The American Lung Association; (202) 682-5864 or <http://www.lungusa.org/>

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign or to request weekly health tips by e-mail, call 1-800-994-WOMAN or TDD at 1-888-220-5446 or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov>. This article was developed through a partnership between the Office on Women's Health and the Wellness Warriors Network.