

DRUGS AND PREGNANCY

The use of drug, both legal and illegal, by a pregnant woman increases the risk to the health of her unborn baby. In the first three months (the first trimester), when the fetus's major organs are developing, the fetus is in the greatest danger. However, some drugs can harm the fetus even when taken much later in the pregnancy.

Careful use of any drug during pregnancy is essential. It is recommended that you heed the following advice:

- If you are pregnant (or suspect that you might be), tell your doctor what drugs you normally use, including caffeine, tobacco, alcohol, marijuana and prescription and non-prescription medications.
- If your doctor agrees to your taking certain types of non-prescription medication during your pregnancy, read the package label to find out what drugs are present and what dose is appropriate - in some cases, the label will advise you about the use of the product during your pregnancy.
- If you want additional information about prescription or non-prescription medications, ask your pharmacist. For additional information about illicit drugs and others that are used socially, contact your local addiction agency.

It is important to be aware of the adverse effects of drugs on your baby if taken while you are pregnant. What can you take during pregnancy?

What if I drink alcoholic beverages?

Pregnant women who drink have the added risk of giving birth to babies with some or all of the abnormalities associated with fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS), the most serious of which include mental retardation, growth deficiency, head and facial deformities, joint and limb abnormalities, cardiac defects, and kidney and external genital malformations. Alcohol crosses the placenta and, thus, the fetus receives as much alcohol as the mother. However, since the fetus burns up alcohol half as fast as the mother does, the alcohol remains in the fetal system longer. It is generally felt that even two drinks a day can have an undesirable effect on the fetus, and the risk of alcohol-related problems increases markedly at higher consumption levels. Although it is known that the risk of bearing an FSA-afflicted child increases with the amount of alcohol consumed, a safe level of consumption has not been established.

What if I have caffeine?

The drug caffeine is present in foods and beverages, including chocolate bars, colas, coffee and tea, as well as in several drug preparations. Most physicians agree that caffeine intake should be decreased during pregnancy because, taken in large quantities, it can harm the fetus. Some studies indicate that drinking more than eight cups of coffee a day can lead to an increased risk of miscarriage, prematurity and congenital malformations. Although the degree of harm to the fetus is still controversial, caffeine has various negative effects on the mother, including a reduced "depth" of sleep, headache, jitteriness, rapid heartbeat, nervousness, and, when daily average is more than eight cups, insomnia, anxiety, stomach ulcers, risk of heart disease and bladder cancer.

What if I use tranquilizers or sleeping pills?

Tranquilizers and sedatives slightly increase the risk of certain fetal malformations if used during the first trimester. Chronic use of some tranquilizers or sleeping pills may also lead to a withdrawal reaction in the newborn baby.

What if I smoke cigarettes?

Forty percent of the women between the ages of 20 and 24, and 31% of the women between the ages of 25 and 30, smoke. Smoking presents many serious risks to the mother and the fetus. Babies of tobacco smokers have a lower birth weight (an average of 8 oz. lower). There is an increased risk of premature birth, miscarriage (the risk is almost double that of non-smoking women) or stillbirth (a four-times greater risk of early separation of the placenta, which is the second leading cause of stillbirth and newborn death in Canada). Smoking mothers also have a significantly higher risk of sudden infant death syndrome ("crib death") than non-smokers. Nursing infants of smoking mothers are more prone to irritability and poor sleeping habits due to small amounts of nicotine that get into the breast milk. There is evidence that children of smoking

If you are uncertain about taking any drugs, including over-the-counter remedies, contact your physician.

Conclusion

It is important to realize that the placenta is not a barrier; most drugs travel across the placenta and reach the fetus. Drinking alcoholic and caffeinated beverages, taking tranquilizers and sleeping pills, smoking tobacco or cannabis, or using cocaine while pregnant are risks to both mother and baby. These negative effects resulting from drug use by the mother while carrying the baby can be lifelong for the child.

mothers are three to five months behind in reading, mathematics and general ability, and that they have abnormally high levels of activity and inattention. These children are more prone to pneumonia and bronchitis in the first year of life, and they are more likely to smoke in adulthood as a result of the parent's example.

What if I smoke cannabis?

Regardless of whether you are pregnant, cannabis should not be used. Smoking cannabis (marijuana, hashish) while pregnant increases the risk of abnormalities in the development of the fetus, an undersized baby, and later behaviour problems. If the mother smokes frequently during pregnancy, the fetus could suffer from chronic hypoxia (lack of oxygen) with possible detrimental effects. Newborns are known to suffer from withdrawal symptoms.

What if I use cocaine?

Using cocaine is a risk to your health and should not be used. If you are pregnant, there is an increased risk of miscarriage, premature delivery, abruptio placentae (when the placenta prematurely tears away from the uterus), malformations of the fetus and behaviour disturbances in the newborn period. Because cocaine constricts the blood vessels, increases the heart rate, and causes an acute rise in blood pressure, the blood supply to the fetus could be reduced or disrupted. Impairing the vital flow of oxygen to the baby could cause a number of problems, including growth retardation and low birth weight.

Using cocaine could cause behavioural disturbances in the newborn: tremulousness, irritability, irregular sleeping patterns, muscular rigidity and poor feeding. These behaviours could potentially interfere with the process of bonding between mother and infant.

DRUG	RISK TO FETUS	RECOMMENDATION
Alcohol	Risk of deformities and mental retardation; risk increases with amount and frequency of drinks.	"Safe level is unknown; consider avoiding entirely.
Caffeine	In large amounts, caffeine is suspected of harming fetus.	Use moderately.
Cannabis (Marijuana, Hashish)	Risk of abnormalities in development of fetus, undersized baby, and later behaviour problems.	Do not use; if using, stop, if you need help to stop, help to stop, talk to your doctor.
Cigarettes	The more you smoke, greater risk of miscarriage, premature delivery, undersized baby, stillbirth and crib death.	Do not use; cut back as much as possible, before and after baby's birth.
Cocaine, Crack	Risk of miscarriage, premature delivery; possible malformations of fetus.	Do not use; if using, stop; if you need help to stop, talk to your doctor.
Tranquilizers & Sleeping Pills	If used regularly, baby may be born with depressed breathing or withdrawal symptoms.	Use only if recommended by doctor.