



The American College of  
Obstetricians and Gynecologists



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS  
FAQ170  
PREGNANCY

## Tobacco, Alcohol, Drugs, and Pregnancy

- **Why is smoking bad during pregnancy?**
- **How can smoking affect pregnancy?**
- **Can cutting down on smoking help?**
- **What effect does drinking alcohol while pregnant have on the fetus?**
- **How can drinking alcohol during pregnancy harm the fetus?**
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### Why is smoking bad during pregnancy?

If a woman smokes when she is pregnant, her baby is exposed to harmful chemicals such as tar, nicotine, and carbon monoxide. Nicotine causes blood vessels to constrict, so less oxygen and nutrients reach the **fetus**. Carbon monoxide lowers the amount of oxygen the baby receives.

### How can smoking affect pregnancy?

Women who smoke during pregnancy are more likely to have certain problems:

- **Ectopic pregnancy**
- Vaginal bleeding
- Problems with the way the **placenta** attaches to the **uterus**
- **Stillbirth**
- A low-birth-weight baby (weighing less than 5½ pounds)

Smoking hurts the baby after birth, too. The baby may breathe in harmful amounts of smoke from cigarettes smoked nearby (secondhand smoke). Breathing secondhand smoke increases the risk of asthma and **sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS)**.

### Can cutting down on smoking help?

The less a woman smokes, the less harm it will do. Cutting down or stopping smoking any time during pregnancy is better than not stopping at all. However, quitting before pregnancy is the best thing to do for both the mother and baby (see the FAQ [It's Time to Quit Smoking](#)).

### What effect does drinking alcohol while pregnant have on the fetus?

When a pregnant woman drinks alcohol, it quickly reaches her fetus. The same amount of alcohol that is in her blood is in her baby's blood. In an adult, the liver breaks down the alcohol. But a baby's liver is not yet able to do this. Thus, alcohol is much more harmful to a fetus than it is to an adult. The more a pregnant woman drinks, the greater the danger to her baby.

## How can drinking alcohol during pregnancy harm the fetus?

Drinking at any time during pregnancy can cause problems. Alcohol increases the chance of having a miscarriage or a **preterm** baby. Alcohol abuse during pregnancy is a leading cause of mental retardation.

Heavy drinking during pregnancy can cause fetal alcohol syndrome. This is a pattern of major physical, mental, and behavior problems in babies who were exposed to alcohol during pregnancy. Smoking, drug use, and poor diet also may play a role in how severely the baby is affected by fetal alcohol syndrome.

## How do drugs used during pregnancy reach the fetus?

Most drugs reach the fetus by crossing the placenta. This tissue inside the uterus provides nourishment to the fetus. If you use drugs after your baby is born, they can be passed to him or her through your breast milk.

## What are examples of illegal drugs that can be harmful during pregnancy?

Illegal drugs that may cause problems for the woman and the fetus during pregnancy include the following:

- Marijuana—a plant product that, when smoked, exposes the fetus to the marijuana smoke that is inhaled by the mother.
- Cocaine—a highly addictive drug that can cause preterm birth. Babies born to women who use cocaine may grow more slowly and may be more irritable or fussy than babies not exposed to cocaine before birth.
- Heroin—when used during pregnancy can cause preterm birth or even fetal death. Children of women who use heroin during pregnancy may be smaller, have trouble thinking clearly, and have behavioral problems.
- Methamphetamine (“meth”)—raises a woman’s blood pressure and heart rate and puts her and her baby at a risk of stroke, brain damage, premature birth, and miscarriage. Babies exposed to methamphetamine also may grow too slowly in the womb, have trouble bonding with others, and be very fussy.

## What pregnancy risks are associated with medications?

Over-the-counter and prescription medications cross the placenta and enter the baby’s bloodstream. In some cases, a medication can cause birth defects, addiction, or other problems in the baby. It is important to talk to your health care provider about all of the medications you are taking.

Some medicines are safe to take during pregnancy. Also, the risks of some medicines may be outweighed by the effects of not taking them. For instance, certain diseases are more harmful to a fetus than the drugs used to treat them. Do not stop taking a medication prescribed for you without first talking to your health care provider. If a medication you are taking poses a risk, your health care provider may recommend switching to a safer drug while you are pregnant.

Prescription medications can be harmful if they are abused. A woman who abuses prescription drugs risks overdose and addiction. Medicines sold over-the-counter can cause problems during pregnancy too. Pain relievers such as aspirin and ibuprofen may be harmful to a fetus. Check with your health care provider before taking any over-the-counter drug, including laxatives and cold or allergy remedies. He or she can give you advice about medicines that are safe for pregnant women.

## What is addiction?

People with an addiction have intense cravings for drugs or alcohol. Usually, they cannot quit by themselves, and treatment is needed to end this behavior.

Some people need emotional support while they are being treated. Treatment programs help them to look at the reasons for their drug use, to know that they are not alone, and to find new ways to cope. If you need help, ask your health care provider for information or a referral.

## How can I get help if I am addicted to alcohol or drugs?

The following groups help people with drug abuse. If you or someone you know has a drug problem, seek help.

### **Alcoholics Anonymous**

Telephone: 212-870-3400

Web site: <http://www.aa.org>

### **Narcotics Anonymous**

World Service Office in Los Angeles

PO Box 9999

Van Nuys, California 91409

Telephone: 818-773-9999

Fax: 818-700-0700

Web site: <http://www.na.org>

### **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration**

Center for Substance Abuse Treatment

Telephone: 1-877-726-4727

Fax: 240-221-4992

Web site: <http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov>

## Glossary

**Ectopic Pregnancy:** A pregnancy in which the fertilized egg begins to grow in a place other than inside the uterus, usually in the fallopian tubes.

**Fetus:** The developing offspring in the uterus from the ninth week of pregnancy until the end of pregnancy.

**Placenta:** Tissue that provides nourishment to and takes waste away from the fetus.

**Preterm:** Before 37 weeks of pregnancy.

**Stillbirth:** Delivery of a baby that shows no sign of life.

**Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS):** The unexpected death of an infant in which the cause is unknown.

**Uterus:** A muscular organ located in the female pelvis that contains and nourishes the developing fetus during pregnancy.

## If you have further questions, contact your obstetrician–gynecologist.

**FAQ170:** Designed as an aid to patients, this document sets forth current information and opinions related to women's health. The information does not dictate an exclusive course of treatment or procedure to be followed and should not be construed as excluding other acceptable methods of practice. Variations, taking into account the needs of the individual patient, resources, and limitations unique to institution or type of practice, may be appropriate.

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