

How My Habits Affect My Baby

Alcohol

If you drink during pregnancy, your baby is drinking also. No amount of alcohol is safe during pregnancy. Drinking during pregnancy can cause your baby to have fetal alcohol syndrome, a combination of physical and mental birth defects. The effects of FAS last a lifetime. Each year, between 1,300 and 8,000 babies in the U.S. are born with FAS.

An unborn baby's body breaks the alcohol down much more slowly than the mother's body does. As a result, the alcohol level of the baby's blood is higher than the mother's and can remain elevated longer than the level in the mother's blood. The alcohol interferes with the baby's ability to get enough oxygen and nourishment for normal cell development in the brain and other body organs.

Drugs

All illegal drugs pose danger to pregnant women. Prescription drugs and over-the-counter drugs are also dangerous. Consult your doctor before taking any over-the-counter or prescribed medicines when you are pregnant.

Smoking

Cigarettes contain nicotine, which causes the blood vessels of the umbilical cord and uterus to constrict, decreasing the amount of oxygen available to the fetus and reducing the amount of blood in the fetal cardiovascular system.

Mothers who smoke place their babies at risk for premature delivery, low birthweight, stillbirth, reduced lung function, and sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). Low birthweight is the leading cause of infant deaths. Smoking also causes complications such as placenta previa, the implantation of the placenta at least partially covering the cervix, and placental abruption, premature separation of the placenta from its implantation in the uterus.

Newborn babies born to smoking mothers have the same amount of the nicotine by-product, cotinine, in their urine as the mothers and spend the first days after birth going through nicotine withdrawal.

Secondhand Smoke

Babies exposed to secondhand smoke after birth are twice as likely to have SIDS compared to those who are not exposed to it. Infants and young children who are regularly exposed to secondhand smoke also have increased risk of getting lower respiratory tract infections (pneumonia, bronchitis) and middle ear infections.

Exposure to secondhand smoke doubles a non-smoker's risk of having a baby with a low birthweight.

Caffeine

Caffeine is a stimulant that is naturally produced by a variety of plants.

Caffeine consumption during pregnancy is controversial. Some studies show that caffeine may increase a woman's chance of having a miscarriage, a preterm delivery, or a baby with a low birthweight, and that it may affect fetal heart rate and movement patterns.

Caffeine passes to the fetus through the placenta. The fetus is unable to detoxify the caffeine.

Sources of caffeine include coffee, chocolate, tea, soft drinks, and some medications (pain relief, migraine, cold, delaying sleep).

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For more information, call your county Extension office. Look in your telephone directory under your county's name to find the number.

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