

Substance Use During Pregnancy

What's the concern?

When you're pregnant, everything you take into your body — what you eat, drink, or breathe — can affect your unborn baby. This includes substances like medicines, illicit (street) drugs, alcohol, and tobacco. This also applies to the very first days and weeks of pregnancy, when you might not even know you're pregnant.

Studies show that many substances can cause problems during pregnancy or birth and may also cause long-term problems for your baby. For example, substances can:

- Limit how your baby grows and develops in the uterus
- Change how your baby's brain, heart, and lungs work
- Cause emotional, physical, and learning problems

Which substances are unsafe?

Many substances that people take normally are unsafe during pregnancy, including some prescription medicines, over-the-counter medicines, herbs, and supplements. **That's why doctors and midwives advise you to avoid most substances if you're pregnant or think you might be — and to discuss the safety of everything you take.** Your providers can help you know what's safe and what's not. They can also work with you to reduce the risks from exposure.

It's impossible to list all the substances that may be unsafe during pregnancy. **However, research has shown that many commonly used substances can cause problems for you and your baby.**

Avoid these:

- **Alcohol.** Experts agree that there's no safe amount of alcohol during pregnancy. Drinking during pregnancy increases the chance of miscarriage and premature birth. It also may cause problems with your baby's brain and behavior.

You need to know:

Many different substances can hurt your developing baby.

Tell your doctor or midwife about everything you've taken (or might take) while you are pregnant. Learn how to help protect yourself and your baby.



- **Cocaine and crack.** Taken during pregnancy, cocaine increases the risk of life-threatening problems for you and your baby. You can have seizures and breathing problems. Your pregnancy can end in miscarriage. Your baby will have an increased risk of birth defects, premature birth, and SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome).
- **Opioids** (street drugs like **heroin** or prescription pain medicines like **codeine, morphine, methadone, Vicodin, Percocet, Oxycotin, Demerol, or Suboxone**). Opioids are linked to increased risk of miscarriage and premature birth. Babies exposed to opioids may be smaller than normal and have thinking and behavior problems. They may also go through withdrawal in the first few weeks of life.
- **Amphetamines** (street drugs like **ecstasy** and **meth** or prescription medicines for ADD and ADHD, such as **Adderall, Ritalin, and Concerta**). Babies exposed to these drugs may have learning and memory problems.
- **Marijuana.** This drug increases your chance of preterm labor. It also puts your baby at risk for learning problems later in life.

- **Benzodiazepines** (prescription medicines for anxiety and seizures, such as **Xanax**, **Valium**, **Klonopin**, **Ativan**). If you take benzodiazepines during pregnancy, your baby may go through withdrawal after birth.
- **Inhalants**. Huffing puts you at risk for seizures, coma, and life-threatening breathing problems. It puts your baby at risk for birth defects, low birth weight, and learning problems.
- **Hallucinogens (PCP, LSD)**. Exposure to this type of drug may cause your baby to go through withdrawal after birth. It also increases the risk of learning, emotional, and behavior problems.
- **Tobacco**. Smoking during pregnancy increases your chance of miscarriage, stillbirth, and preterm labor. It also puts your baby at increased risk for being born too small or SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome).

What if I have a prescription?

Unfortunately, many of the things you might normally take for your health are unsafe during pregnancy. This includes prescription medicines as well as over-the-counter medicines and health supplements. If something you take is considered unsafe, your provider can work with you to reduce the risk. You may need to switch to a safer alternative, lower your dose, or stop the medicine for a while. You may also be advised to continue the medicine if the risks of stopping seem to outweigh the benefits.

What if the substance is illegal or I can't stop?

Although it may be difficult, you still need to talk to your doctor or midwife. Their concern is your health and your baby's health. Talking truthfully to them about your substance use gives them a chance to:

- **Help you understand the risks.** It's good to get the facts. You may be reassured by what you learn.
- **Help you quit.** Your doctor or midwife can connect you to resources to support a healthier life for you and your baby. If you risk withdrawal, your provider may be able to prescribe something to ease your symptoms and help you quit.
- **Monitor your pregnancy more closely, if needed.** The more your doctor or provider knows, the better they can care for you.
- **Anticipate special care your baby may need.** For example, if your baby may have withdrawal symptoms after birth, you can plan for newborn care that is sensitive to your baby's needs.



For more support and information

The MothertoBaby phone line:
1-800-822-BABY (2229)

Email: expertinfo@mothertobaby.org

Text Messaging: 855-999-3525

Get immediate, free advice about the safety of any substance (medicine, drug, drink, or supplement) during pregnancy or breastfeeding.

This service is available Monday through Friday from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
1-800-662-HELP (English, Spanish)
findtreatment.samhsa.gov

Call or access this service to locate treatment programs (mental health, drug, alcohol) in your area.

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