

Smoking & Pregnancy

Did you know?

When you or people you are with smoke, your baby smokes too.

What happens when you smoke?

When you smoke, you breathe in a gas called carbon monoxide that interferes with the transport of oxygen in your blood, so that your baby gets less oxygen. Lack of oxygen can cause your baby to grow more slowly and gain less weight in your womb.

The nicotine in cigarettes can also harm your baby. Nicotine restricts blood flow to the placenta, meaning your baby gets even fewer nutrients and less oxygen she needs for best development. Nicotine also makes your baby's heart beat faster.

When you smoke, you also expose your baby to all the other toxic chemicals found in tobacco smoke. There are more than 4,000 chemicals in tobacco smoke, including 50 that are associated with cancer.

What are the health problems associated with babies whose mothers smoke?

Smoking is known to have an effect on babies before they are born. The chemicals in tobacco smoke are passed on to the baby through the placenta. Nicotine increases a baby's heart rate and breathing movements. During pregnancy, smokers have a greater risk of miscarriages. During the birth, they are more likely to have complications.

Babies of women who smoked or were exposed to second-hand tobacco smoke during pregnancy are, on average, smaller at birth than babies of non-smoking mothers. Babies born with a lower-than-average birth weight are more likely to get infections and have other health problems. A clear relationship exists between the number of cigarettes smoked during pregnancy and a slowdown in the growth of the fetus. These babies are more prone to perinatal complications, illnesses and death.

What will the long-term effects be if my baby is exposed to tobacco smoke?

Exposure to tobacco smoke affects your baby for life. Your baby may have learning problems, more ear infections and more colds and breathing problems. Being born small can affect your baby's health into adulthood.

What if you don't smoke but others around you do?

Studies show that regular exposure to second-hand smoke may harm you and your baby. Also known as environmental tobacco smoke (ETS), second-hand smoke contains the same toxic chemicals and carcinogens that smokers inhale. Two of the toxic chemicals in second-hand smoke are nitrogen dioxide, a gas that can damage lungs, and the poisonous gas hydrogen cyanide.

Second-hand smoke is especially harmful to babies because their lungs are still growing and

developing. Children regularly exposed to second-hand smoke are at least 50% more likely to suffer damage to their lungs and breathing problems such as asthma.

When you breathe in second-hand smoke, you increase your risks of developing lung cancer, heart disease, breathing problems and irritation of the eyes, lungs and throat.

If you are going to be around people that smoke, explain to them that you and your baby need smoke-free air.

Here are some tips to avoid second-hand smoke:

- Make your home and car smoke-free spaces
- Ask your partner, family members and friends not to smoke around you
- Avoid going to smoky places, such as bars
- When you are with people who want to smoke, ask them to smoke outside

The sooner you quit, the better for you and your baby

If you smoke, the best thing you can do to protect your health and your baby's health is to quit. By quitting smoking, you give your baby a healthy start in life. As well, you will experience many health benefits such as a lower blood pressure and heart rate and a decreased risk of complications during labour and delivery. You will also avoid many of the future health risks of smoking such as cancer, heart disease and respiratory illnesses.

Tips for quitting:

- Write down a plan of action for quitting. Make sure to include your reasons for quitting for both you and your baby.
- Consult your physician or health care professional about ways to quit that are most appropriate while you are pregnant.
- In anticipation of your quit day, reduce the number of cigarettes you smoke per day. Set a limit and stick to it.
- Choose a quit day. On that day, throw away your cigarettes, matches, lighters and ashtrays.
- Change your routine to avoid the times you most want to have a cigarette.
- Stay away from smoky places or occasions that make you feel like smoking.
- When you crave a cigarette, try substituting something else. Brush your teeth, drink a glass of water, chew sugar-free gum, eat a piece of fruit or some vegetable sticks or phone a friend.
- Keep your hands busy. Try knitting, needlework, crossword puzzles or stress balls.
- Seek out a stop-smoking support group in your neighbourhood.
- Check out quitting resources such as Quit Tips, On the Road to Quitting and Toll-Free Telephone Quit-Smoking lines available at Go Smokefree (link to www.gosmokefree.ca).
- Don't get discouraged. Smoking is a hard habit to kick. Be proud of your efforts and keep trying! Be sure to ask for help from your health care professionals, your friends and family.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. I only smoke a few cigarettes a day. Should I still quit or cut back?

Yes. All tobacco smoke is bad for both you and your baby. The less you smoke, the better.

2. What does smoking do to my baby?

When you smoke, your baby gets less oxygen, which can cause the baby to grow more slowly and gain less weight. There are numerous health problems associated with small birthweight babies.

3. Don't some mothers smoke while they're pregnant but still have healthy babies?

Yes, but they're lucky. Smoking during pregnancy is a gamble that puts your child at risk. Why take a chance?

4. Will I gain extra weight if I quit now?

It's possible that if you stop smoking you may look to food or candy to replace your oral habit. Try a stick of sugar-free gum instead. If you gain a few pounds, don't worry. With a plan for physical activity and healthy eating, you can lose the extra weight after your baby is born. You'll also feel great knowing you gave your baby the best possible start in life. Good for you!

5. Is it okay for me to smoke after the baby is born?

The best choice for you and your baby is to remain smoke-free. By resuming smoking, you are putting your baby at risk from the harmful effects of second-hand smoke and your own health at risk from the effects of smoking. By staying smoke-free you're ensuring a healthy normal life for both you and your baby.

6. How can I help someone who is pregnant and trying to quit?

A pregnant woman trying to quit needs your support and understanding. Here are some tips on how you can help:

- Ask her how you can help. Make yourself available as much as possible, especially during the first few days.
- Listen. Ask her to talk openly about her feelings.
- Let her know about counselling and group support services in her community.
- Participate together in healthy activities such as walking, swimming or yoga.
- Visit smoke-free places where smoking is not allowed.
- Offer practical support to help her relieve stress. For example, offer to babysit her children or help her with the housework.
- Be patient. Many smokers have trouble quitting the first time they try. Quitting is a process that may have several relapses. If she has a slip-up, encourage her to try quitting again as soon as possible. Talk about what caused the relapse and how she could deal with it differently next time.

- Celebrate her success by marking significant milestones (e.g. one week, one month). Take her out to dinner, bring her some flowers or book her for a massage.¹

Sources:

Health Canada's Go Smokefree Web site:

- *Advice for Pregnant Women and New Mothers.*
<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hecs-sesc/tobacco/quitting/mothers.html>
- *Pre and Postnatal Issues.*
http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hecs-sesc/tobacco/facts/health_facts/pre_postnatal.html
- *Second-hand Smoke.*
<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hecs-sesc/tobacco/facts/index.html#ETS>

Canadian Health Network - A consumer health information service brought to you by the Public Health Agency of Canada and major health organizations across Canada.
www.canadian-health-network.ca

¹ AADAC. The Truth about Smoking and Pregnancy.
http://tobacco.aadac.com/about_smoking/smoking_pregnancy/truth_about_smoking_pregnancy.ppdf