

From the time you find out you're pregnant, you'll want to give your baby the best start at life. However, unhealthy lifestyle choices and addictions can seriously impact the health of your unborn baby, often very early in your pregnancy. Everything that goes into your bloodstream makes its way to your unborn baby and can affect your baby's ability to develop properly and stay healthy.

Smoking

Babies exposed to cigarette smoke:

- Are more likely to die from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, or SIDS.
- Are more likely to be stillborn or born early. In fact, preterm delivery is a leading cause of death, disability, and disease among newborns.
- Have a higher risk for birth defects like cleft lips and/or cleft palates.
- Have a greater likelihood of lung and brain damage.

These devastating complications come from the two main toxins that cigarettes produce: nicotine and carbon monoxide. Together these chemicals significantly reduce the supply of oxygen to your baby. Nicotine narrows the blood vessels throughout your body and in the umbilical cord, choking off the supply of oxygen. Red blood cells that normally carry oxygen start to pick up molecules of carbon monoxide. This further reduces the amount of oxygen carried in your bloodstream and to your baby. In other words, when you smoke, vape, or are exposed to second and third hand smoke, your baby isn't getting all of the oxygen she needs to grow. Mothers should quit smoking immediately and limit their exposure to other smokers.

Alcohol

Alcohol is toxic to an unborn baby. Drinking any kind of alcohol during your pregnancy puts your baby at serious risk for a range of lifelong disabilities. There is no safe amount of alcohol consumption at any point in a pregnancy. Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder is the range of physical, mental, behavioral, and/or learning disabilities that occur because of a baby's exposure to alcohol. Fetal Alcohol Syndrome is the most severe. The best course of action, if you are pregnant or are trying to get pregnant, is to quit drinking any alcohol and stay alcohol-free all throughout your pregnancy.

Drugs

Always check with your doctor before taking any medications, whether prescribed or over-the-counter, to make sure that they won't harm your baby. Check the labels on all over-the-counter medications to see what they say about pregnancy or breastfeeding. Herbs should be treated like medication as well.

There are no street drugs that are safe to take at any time during pregnancy. Studies have shown that the use of illegal drugs during pregnancy can result in miscarriage, low birth weight, premature labor, and fetal and/or maternal death.

Kicking the Habit

Sometimes it takes having a child to push us to make important life changes. Where we might not have done it for ourselves, we will do it for our children. But, you are valuable, too, and your life has meaning. If you struggle with addiction of any kind, it is important for your sake and the sake of your child to get help immediately. Overcoming a drug or alcohol addiction is tough. Most people cannot do it on their own. If you've been unsuccessful in the past, there is no shame in reaching out for help now. There are recovery programs that help people to overcome their addictions and live drug-free. Rather than face potential legal action, losing your parental rights, giving birth to a very sick baby, or potential health problems yourself, ask your doctor for help immediately. You don't have to take this journey alone. There are many who will walk alongside you and help you become healthy again.

Resources include:

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13. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. An Alcohol-Free Pregnancy is the Best Choice for Your Baby. Found at https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/fasd/documents/fasdbrochure_final.pdf, accessed 3/20/2019.
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