

Risks to the Foetus

Alcohol

The Chief Medical Officers for the UK recommend that if you're pregnant or planning to become pregnant, the safest approach is not to drink alcohol at all to keep risks to your baby to a minimum.

Drinking in pregnancy can lead to long-term harm to the baby, with the more you drink, the greater the risk. When you drink, alcohol passes from your blood through the placenta and to your baby.

A baby's liver is one of the last organs to develop and does not mature until the later stages of pregnancy. Your baby cannot process alcohol as well as you can, and too much exposure to alcohol can seriously affect their development. Drinking alcohol, especially in the first 3 months of pregnancy, increases the risk of miscarriage, premature birth and your baby having a low birthweight. The risks are greater the more you drink. The effects later in childhood include learning difficulties and behavioural problems.

Drinking heavily throughout pregnancy can cause your baby to develop a serious condition called foetal alcohol syndrome (FAS). Symptoms include:

- a head that's smaller than average
- poor growth – they may be smaller than average at birth, grow slowly as they get older, and be shorter than average as an adult
- distinctive facial features – such as small eyes, a thin upper lip, and a smooth area between the nose and upper lip, though these may become less noticeable with age
- movement and balance problems
- learning difficulties – such as problems with thinking, speech, social skills, timekeeping, maths or memory
- issues with attention, concentration or hyperactivity
- problems with the liver, kidneys, heart or other organs
- hearing and vision problems



Drugs

Consumption of illegal drugs is not safe for the unborn baby or for the mother. Studies have shown that taking illegal drugs during pregnancy can result in: Miscarriage, low birth weight, premature labour, placental abruption, foetal and/or Maternal death

Smoking marijuana increases the levels of carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide in the blood, which reduces the oxygen supply to the baby – increased risk of developmental delays



Later in pregnancy, cocaine use can cause placental abruption leading to severe bleeding, preterm birth, and foetal death. According to the American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynaecology (ACOG), women who use cocaine during their pregnancy have a 25 % increased chance of premature labour. Babies born to mothers who use cocaine throughout their pregnancy may also have a smaller head and be growth restricted. Babies who are exposed to cocaine later in pregnancy may be born dependent and suffer from withdrawal symptoms such as tremors,

sleeplessness, muscle spasms, and feeding difficulties. Some experts believe that learning difficulties may result as the child gets older. Risks increase if cocaine is used frequently throughout pregnancy.

Babies can also be born addicted to heroin and can suffer from withdrawal symptoms. Withdrawal symptoms include irritability, convulsions, diarrhoea, fever, sleep abnormalities, and joint stiffness. Mothers who inject narcotics are more susceptible to HIV, which can be passed to their unborn children.

Smoking

It's difficult to imagine when you can't see your baby but smoking when you're pregnant is like blowing smoke in your baby's face. When you smoke a cigarette, the poisons from the cigarette smoke are passed on to your baby. Not only is this very distressing for your baby, but the exposure to these poisons can last up to 15 minutes at a time. It's like putting your baby in a smoke-filled room for 15 minutes.

When you smoke you breathe in more than 4,000 chemicals from the cigarette. The smoke goes from your lungs into your bloodstream. That blood flows to your placenta and umbilical cord, right into your baby's tiny body. This causes your baby to struggle for oxygen.

One of the chemicals found in cigarettes is carbon monoxide, a dangerous chemical that gets into your bloodstream. This restricts the supply of oxygen that's essential for your baby's healthy growth and development. Smoking may lead to children having low IQs, learning disabilities and behavioural problems such as a short attention span and hyperactivity. The foetus may also be more prone to certain birth defects. Smoking is linked to low birth weights and smaller than average lungs. Due to smoking in pregnancy a baby can experience breathlessness and wheezing in the first six months of life. Smoking is also linked to increased risk of colic in the baby's first few months of life. Smoking also increases the risk of cot death and still birth.

