Why Is It Harmful To Take Drugs During Pregnancy?

Any prescription medication and illegal drug used during your pregnancy can cause your baby to not grow well before and/or after birth. Prescription medication and illegal drug use during pregnancy may place your baby at risk for immediate and lifelong concerns such as:

- Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS)
- Difficulty in school
- Serious health problems
- Sleep disorders
- Developmental delays
- Impulse control problems
- Behavioral, emotional and learning problems
- Addictive behaviors

What Is Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome?

Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS) is a group of problems that occur in a baby who has been exposed to certain drugs while in the mother's womb. It may also be called drug withdrawal syndrome.

What Causes Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome?

Almost every prescription medication and illegal drug can pass from you to your baby. Taking certain prescription medication and illegal drugs while you are pregnant puts your baby at risk for NAS. At birth, your baby could be dependent on these drugs. Once your baby is born, they are no longer getting these drugs and may start having symptoms of withdrawal.

Why Do Symptoms of Withdrawal Vary?

The symptoms can vary due to:

- The type and number of prescription medication and illegal drugs used.
- When a prescription medication and illegal drug was last used.
- How much and how long a prescription medication and illegal drug was used.
- How your baby's body breaks down and gets rid of the prescription medication and illegal drugs.

What Are The Most Common Withdrawal Symptoms of Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome?

- Breathing fast (tachypnea)
- Ineffective or disorganized sucking
- Diarrhea (loose or watery stools)
- Irritability (extreme crying)
- Excessive sucking
- Fever (high temperature)
- High-pitched crying
- Mottling (splotchy skin)
- Tightness of arm and leg muscles
- Hyperactive reflexes
- Stuffynose
- Dehydration
- Seizures
- Sweating
- Yawning
- Poor Feeding
- Sneezing
- Vomiting
- Tremors (trembling)
- Sleep problems

How Is Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome Treated?

Any baby with known or possible exposure to certain prescription medication and illegal drugs will be watched for withdrawal symptoms. It is very important for your doctor and your baby's doctor to know about your prescription medication and illegal drug use and history. Please be honest. We are here to help you and your baby.

- A scoring system is used to measure your baby's withdrawal symptoms. This is called the Finnegan Scoring Tool. Symptoms are given points, and the total score helps us decide how to help your baby.
- Some babies may need to be transferred to a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit to be treated with morphine. Other medicines may be needed if a baby starts having seizures.

What Are Some Examples of Specific Problems Related To Specific Prescription Medication or Illegal Drugs?

1. Narcotics
   - Methadone, Heroin, Morphine, Fentanyl (Sublimaze ®), Oxycodone (OxyContin®) (Roxicet ◊), Hydrocodone (Lortab®), Oxyphene (Opana®), Hydrodromphone (Dilaudid®), Codeine, Buprenorphine (Subutex ®), Buprenorphine/naloxone (Suboxone®)

   Your baby can have serious withdrawal symptoms. These symptoms can last up to six months. Seizures are more likely in infants born to narcotic users. Your baby may also be at risk for Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).

2. Antidepressants
   - Sertraline (Zoloft®), Paroxetine (Paxil®), Fluoxetine (Prozac®), Citalopram (Celexa®, Cipralex®).

   Your baby can have lung problems as a result of using certain antidepressants during pregnancy. Your baby can also experience withdrawal symptoms.

3. Benzodiazepines
   - Alprazolam (Xanax®), Chlordiazepoxide, Clonazepam (Klonopin®), Diazepam (Valium®), Lorazepam (Ativan®)

   Your baby can have withdrawal symptoms. Symptoms may occur within days to weeks after birth. Premature birth and low birth weight may occur. Your baby may experience breathing problems or low blood sugar at birth. There have even been reports of “floppy infant syndrome” (lack of muscle tone) with some benzodiazepines used during pregnancy.
4. Street Drugs

Name of Drug – Cocaine
Problems:
- Places baby at risk for Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS)
- Places you at risk for placental abruption, a life threatening emergency for you and your baby

Name of Drug – Marijuana
Problems:
- Low birth weight which places baby at risk for immediate and lifelong problems

Name of Drug – Methamphetamine, Inhalants, PCP (angel dust)
Problems:
- Miscarriage
- Premature labor
- Severe withdrawal symptoms for baby

5. Alcohol
A baby exposed to alcohol may be born with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS). The withdrawal symptoms from alcohol may last up to 18 months. Specific deformities and mental retardation are also seen with fetal alcohol syndrome.

6. Cigarettes (Nicotine)
Smokers have smaller babies. These babies are also at risk for being stillborn or premature. Smoking cigarettes during your pregnancy also places your baby at risk of dying from SIDS.

How Can I Prevent Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome?
To keep your baby from being born with this syndrome, please:
- Use birth control to prevent pregnancy.
- Stop using prescription medication and illegal drugs before you get pregnant. Seek medical treatment if you think you are pregnant. Do not stop taking any prescription medication and illegal drugs you are on without talking to a doctor first. A doctor can decide which prescription medication and illegal drugs can be safely stopped or weaned during your pregnancy.

How Can I Help Care For My Baby With Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome?
A baby suffering from withdrawal is irritable. It may be hard to comfort your baby. You will be taught what you need to know about caring for your baby while your baby is in the hospital. Some of the ways you can help care for your baby include:
- Swaddling your baby in a blanket while holding
- Holding your baby during feedings
- Letting your baby rest between feedings
- Giving your baby a firm touch instead of stroking your baby
- Gently rocking or swaying to help calm your baby
- Speaking softly and moving slowly with your baby
- Provide quiet and peaceful surroundings

After Your Baby Goes Home:
- You need to keep all of your well-baby appointments with your pediatrician. Your pediatrician will monitor your baby’s growth, feeding and immunizations.
- Your baby is at risk for developmental delays and also needs to be followed by a developmental specialist (physiatrist).

We want to do all that we can to help you understand how to best care for your baby. Our goal is to get your baby home with you safely and as quickly as possible.

Important Information

Literature Developed By: Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at East Tennessee Children’s Hospital