

Drug and Alcohol Use: Making Safe Choices

"I think my husband is going to take the laptop to the hospital."

Pregnancy is a time of excitement, planning and eager anticipation. It can also be a time filled with questions and anxious thoughts: Am I taking any medications that could harm my baby?

"If you're thinking about starting a family, it's best to have an appointment with your ob/gyn to go over your medications and supplements before you actually try to get pregnant."

Women may need to take medication to manage long-term health conditions. In fact, as many as 7 in 10 pregnant women take at least one prescription drug during pregnancy.

"A common prescription medication that we often address before conception or when we find out someone is pregnant are anti-depressant, anti-anxiety medications. If you're on a drug that's been around for decades like sertraline or fluoxetine, very often, if the benefits outweigh the risks, we'll allow that patient and recommend the patient to stay on that medication. Some of the newer medications where we don't have as much experience or safety data, we may recommend changing."

Some prescription medicines can cause complications including: Premature birth, meaning the baby is born before 37 weeks; Low birthweight. That's when the baby is born weighing less than 5 pounds, 8 ounces. Birth defects; Learning and behavioral problems later in life; Miscarriage; Stillbirth; and sudden infant death syndrome, or SIDS.

"For most medications, if it's limited exposure, the risk is small. No one can tell you it's zero, but it's usually small, and most women are going to be okay, and most babies are going to be okay."

A more serious concern is prescription drug abuse. That's when a medication is used in a way that's not recommended. The most commonly abused prescription drugs are opioid pain relievers.

"There is an epidemic of opioid abuse in this country, and it is climbing. It is throughout America in every neighborhood."

Opioid painkiller abuse and addiction can cause neonatal abstinence syndrome or NAS, which means the baby is born addicted to the drug the mother has taken and goes through withdrawal after birth. These babies are more likely to have problems breathing and feeding, and they may even have seizures.

"It is turning into a huge problem and it is growing every year."

If drug addiction is a struggle for you, it's important to confide in your primary care provider for both your sake and your baby's.

"If a woman finds herself pregnant, and she's dealing with an addiction, the best thing to do is confront it. Make sure you disclose that to your healthcare provider so we can point you in the right direction and get you the help that you need."

Your provider can help you safely stop or get alternative treatment. If you don't feel you're getting the support you need, ask for a referral. Keep in mind that stopping suddenly can cause withdrawal symptoms and even increase the risk of miscarriage.

"We're there to help women and we're not going to use that against women."

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Illegal, illicit or street drugs are also harmful to you and your baby. These drugs include: Cocaine; Ecstasy, methamphetamine and other so-called club drugs; Prescription drugs that are abused or are not prescribed for the person taking them; Heroin; and Marijuana. Some women assume marijuana is safe in pregnancy since it's been approved for medical and recreational use in some states.

"I've had patients tell me they've used it because they are nauseated in the first trimester. You're dealing with a fetus that is developing and growing, and just as you don't let children smoke cigarettes or drink alcohol because it can affect the teenage brain, you wouldn't do that to an even more vulnerable brain."

That's why cigarette smoking and alcohol use should also be avoided in pregnancy.

"It's very common for a woman to come to us for their first appointment when they find out they're pregnant and say, 'You know, I was at a party last weekend or a month ago and I was drinking, is that okay?' And it usually is okay. We have to go forward. We can't go back and change the past, but a limited exposure to alcohol is more than likely not going to cause problems with a pregnancy."

Binge drinking and heavy alcohol use during pregnancy can cause abnormal fetal development and fetal alcohol syndrome or FAS, which is a condition characterized by mental and physical defects. FAS is the most common preventable form of mental delay in the U.S.

"Once the baby is delivered and the pediatricians are dealing with it, it's already done, you can't take that back. There are no do overs."

It's never too late to stop abusing alcohol or drugs during pregnancy. Your care provider, hospital or clinic can give support and provide you with the help you need.