Understanding Effects of Illicit Drugs Used During Pregnancy

Cocaine Facts
Cocaine is a stimulant of the central nervous system, crosses the placenta during pregnancy, and enters the baby’s blood circulation. Researchers have not determined how much cocaine it takes to cause birth defects. It is recommended that any amount of cocaine be avoided during pregnancy.

- Some studies have reported an increased risk of birth defects including abnormalities of the brain, heart, intestines, and limbs in babies whose mothers used cocaine prenatally. The risk for birth defects may be greater if the mother used cocaine frequently during the pregnancy.
- Increased risk for preterm delivery and low birth rate; before labor begins, cocaine can cause the placenta to separate from the wall of the uterus (placental abruption) which can lead to extensive bleeding and can be fatal for both the mother and baby; intracranial hemorrhage (bleeding in the brain) before or soon after birth can cause permanent disability.

The following behaviors and significant central nervous system problems have been seen in infants and young children whose mothers abused cocaine during pregnancy, especially close to delivery:
- Irritability, interrupted sleep patterns, and problems with sensory stimulation.
- Problems with impulsive behavior, poor attention span, and language difficulties.

Marijuana Facts
The main active chemical in marijuana is delta-9-THC and is known to cross the placenta during pregnancy. Smoking marijuana may decrease the amount of oxygen and nutrients the baby receives, thereby affecting the growth of the baby.

- Some studies have suggested there is an increased risk of premature birth and low birth weight for babies whose mothers smoked marijuana regularly throughout the pregnancy and after delivery.
- Most research studies have not found an increased risk for birth defects among babies exposed to marijuana prenatally.
- Some studies of prenatal exposure to marijuana have shown an effect on behavior, academic performance and short term memory of children. These results were seen more often in children whose mothers were heavy marijuana users, typically one or more marijuana cigarettes per day.
- Although the results from studies have been inconsistent, the possibility of an effect on the developing brain cannot be ruled out.
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Heroin Facts
According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (2012), about 669,000 Americans reported using heroin in the past year, a number that has been on the rise since 2007. Heroin is an illegal opiate, in the same class of drugs as legal opioid-based prescription drugs used for pain relief, such as OxyContin and Percocet. These drugs are highly addictive.
For further information please also see: “Facts about Opiate Use in Pregnancy”
www.emory.edu/MSACD

Illicit drug use during pregnancy has been associated with a variety of adverse effects:
- Low birth weight
- Prematurity
- Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS)
- Increased rates of infant mortality
- Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS)

Research studies on long term effects of prenatal drug abuse on development, cognition and behavior are complicated because the women in these studies may be abusing other drugs, cigarettes, or alcohol. The quality and consistency of the home environment may influence outcomes for the child.

Children of women who abuse drugs during pregnancy should be identified early in life and provided with the medical, social and educational services that they need to reach their highest potential.

An important fact to remember is that all women have a 3% to 5% chance of having a baby with a birth defect with each pregnancy, regardless if they abuse drugs or not. Both genetic and environmental factors can cause birth defects. However, the causes of about 60 to 70 percent of birth defects currently are unknown.