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HIV, Pregnancy, and Tobacco Use

Tobacco use during pregnancy is harmful for both a mother and her unborn baby.

For women living with HIV, smoking tobacco during pregnancy can increase the chances that HIV will be passed to the baby. This is true even if the woman is taking her HIV medications and has a low viral load.

If a woman is pregnant or planning a pregnancy, becoming tobacco-free can help her health and the health of her baby.

Tobacco Use and Pregnancy

There are over 4,000 chemicals in tobacco products (e.g., cigarettes and cigars), including carbon monoxide, nicotine, and over 60 cancer-causing chemicals. These chemicals can negatively affect the unborn baby and increase the chance of problems during pregnancy and delivery.

Babies born to mothers who use tobacco products have a greater risk of preterm birth, low birth weight, developmental and learning problems, visual and respiratory problems, bleeding in the brain, jaundice, and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).

Pregnant women who use tobacco products have a higher risk of pregnancy difficulties such as miscarriage, ectopic pregnancy

(fertilized egg attaches outside the uterus, usually in the fallopian tubes), premature rupture of the membranes (i.e., water “breaking” too early), vaginal bleeding, and damage to the placenta. A healthy placenta is necessary for an unborn baby’s growth and health.

Tobacco Use and HIV

Tobacco use is known to harm the body’s immune system (i.e., the system that protects the body against infections and diseases). Having a compromised immune system increases the risk of developing many cancers, diseases, and infections.

Since HIV also causes damage to the immune system, a pregnant woman with HIV who smokes tobacco is at even greater risk for infections and diseases. While HIV medications aim to improve immune functioning, smoking tobacco can decrease the chance of treatment success. Specifically, smoking has been associated with increased viral loads (i.e., the amount of HIV in the blood) and poorer immune responses to HIV treatment.

Tobacco Use, HIV, and Pregnancy

In pregnant women living with HIV, the risk of passing HIV from mother to child (transmission) is a main concern. Specifically, increased transmission risk has been associated with:

- maternal HIV viral load (i.e., the amount of HIV in the mother's blood)
- premature rupture of membranes
- damage to the placenta
- low birth weight of the baby
- preterm birth

Unfortunately, many of the problems caused by tobacco use during pregnancy are also known to increase the risk of each of these factors occurring. Smoking tobacco increases the risk of transmission up to three times in women not receiving HIV treatment. This increased risk of transmission is true even in women who are taking their HIV medications and have a low viral load.

The Good News

Becoming tobacco-free reduces the chances of negative outcomes for a woman's pregnancy and her unborn baby. In women living with HIV, quitting smoking can also reduce the chance of passing HIV to their babies. For women who are having a hard time quitting, cutting down on the amount of tobacco they use can help their health and the health of their babies.

There are resources available to help pregnant women and those planning a pregnancy to become tobacco-free or reduce their use. Women can speak to their healthcare providers for help, or refer to one of the websites listed below.

Expecting to Quit (www.expectingtoquit.ca)

Information for healthcare providers and pregnant women about how to quit or reduce smoking.

PACT (Partnership to Assist with Cessation of Tobacco; www.makeapact.ca)

Information and support for people trying to quit smoking and for people working with those trying to quit smoking, as well as information about Sacred Tobacco and traditional uses of tobacco.

Pregnets (www.pregnets.org)

Information, resources, and support for pregnant and postpartum women to help them quit or reduce smoking, as well as resources and clinical practice guidelines for healthcare providers.

Saskatchewan Prevention Institute (www.skprevention.ca)

Information and resources on tobacco use and pregnancy, as well as HIV and pregnancy.

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