

# facts on

## Facts on HIV, Pregnancy, and Tobacco Use

Tobacco use during pregnancy is harmful for both the mother and unborn baby. For people living with HIV, smoking tobacco during pregnancy can increase the chance that HIV will be passed to the baby. This increased risk remains even if the pregnant person is taking their HIV medications and has a low viral load. For people who are pregnant or planning a pregnancy, quitting tobacco can help their health and the health of their baby.

### **Tobacco Use and Pregnancy**

There are over 4,000 chemicals in tobacco products (e.g., cigarettes, vapes, and cigars), including carbon monoxide, nicotine, and over 60 cancer-causing chemicals. These chemicals can negatively affect an unborn baby and increase the chance of problems during pregnancy and delivery. Pregnant people who use tobacco products have a higher risk of complications like miscarriage, ectopic pregnancy (fertilized egg attaches outside of the uterus), premature rupture of the membranes (i.e., water “breaking” too early), and damage to the placenta. A healthy placenta is necessary for an unborn baby’s growth and health. Pregnant people who use tobacco also have a higher risk of depression and nutrient deficiencies. Babies born to mothers who use tobacco products have a higher risk of preterm birth, low birthweight, birth defects, visual and respiratory problems, bleeding in the brain, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), developmental and learning problems, and behaviour and emotional disorders in childhood.

### **Tobacco Use and HIV**

Tobacco use harms 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 damages the immune system, pregnant people with HIV who smoke tobacco are at an 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 is associated with increased viral loads (i.e., the amount of HIV in the blood), poorer immune responses to HIV treatment, increased risk of lung cancer, and decreased life expectancy.

### **Tobacco Use, HIV, and Pregnancy**

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

- 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 associated with tobacco use during pregnancy are also known to increase the risk of these factors occurring. Smoking tobacco increases the risk of transmission even in people who are taking their HIV medications and have a low viral load.

### **Traditional Tobacco Use**

Traditional tobacco use has been an important aspect of Indigenous cultures on Turtle Island (North and Central America) for thousands of years. Tobacco is a highly

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respected plant used in rituals, ceremonies, and prayers, and serves many medicinal purposes. Traditional tobacco use is sacred in many Indigenous cultures and should not be disrespected or confused with commercial, non-traditional tobacco use or tobacco addiction. Prenatal support and culturally responsive care are important to ensure healthy pregnancies for Indigenous people, including those living with HIV who smoke.

### The Good News

Becoming tobacco-free reduces the chances of negative outcomes for pregnant people and their babies. For people living with HIV, quitting smoking can also reduce the risk of passing HIV to their babies. For those 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 people and those planning a pregnancy to become tobacco-free or reduce their use. People can speak to their healthcare providers for help or refer to one of the websites listed below.

### Smokers' Helpline

<https://www.smokershelpline.ca/>

### Quit Map

<https://csl.cancer.ca/talktobacco/en/>

### Quit with Confidence

<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/smoking-tobacco/quit-smoking.html>

### Talk Tobacco: Indigenous Quit Smoking Support

<https://www.smokershelpline.ca/talktobacco>

### Pregnets

<https://intrepidlab.ca/en/pregnets/>

### SmokeFree Women

<https://women.smokefree.gov/>

### QuitNow

<https://quitnow.ca/>

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