Smoking and pregnancy

Tobacco smoke contains toxic chemicals
The umbilical cord is your baby’s lifeline. When you smoke, toxic chemicals are absorbed into your bloodstream and passed onto your baby through the umbilical cord. Tobacco smoke contains more than 7000 toxic chemicals, which may harm you and your baby.

Two of these toxic chemicals are carbon monoxide and nicotine. Carbon monoxide replaces the oxygen in your blood and reduces the amount of oxygen available to your baby through the umbilical cord. Nicotine increases your heart rate and your baby’s heart rate. Nicotine also causes your blood vessels to narrow, which reduces the flow of blood through the umbilical cord. It also reduces your baby’s ability to exercise their chest muscles to prepare for breathing after birth.

If you are a non-smoker, being exposed to tobacco smoke by your partner, family or friends is also dangerous. Breathing in the smoke from someone else’s cigarette is called ‘passive smoking’ and exposes you and your baby to toxic chemicals. Your womb does not protect your unborn baby from the harmful effects of tobacco smoke.

Making your home a smoke-free zone will help you to quit and will reduce your baby’s exposure to the dangers of tobacco smoke. If your partner smokes, encourage them to consider quitting too.

Breastfeeding
If you continue to smoke while you breastfeed, toxic chemicals are passed onto your baby through your breast milk. Although this is not good for your baby, it is better than not breastfeeding at all.

Nicotine alters the flavour of breast milk, and as a result, your baby may struggle at the breast or even refuse the breast. Your ability to breastfeed is also affected by smoking. Women who smoke tend to produce less milk and wean their babies earlier than non-smokers.

Research has found that babies who are formula-fed are more likely to suffer from the effects of second-hand cigarette smoke, compared to a breastfed baby. Breast milk contains important factors to help babies fight illness. Exposure to second-hand cigarette smoke increases a baby’s risk of lung infections, asthma and SIDS.

If you are having difficulty quitting, consider the damage every cigarette is causing and decide whether smoking is worth the risk to your or your baby. Try not to smoke before or during feeds, go outside to smoke, and cover up your clothes and hair when you do smoke as smoke gets trapped in your clothing, hair and skin which is also harmful to your baby.

Further information

HOW TO QUIT
To improve your chance of quitting smoking for good, it is a good idea to plan ahead.

You may find these tips helpful:

• Get support. Quitline’s trained counsellors are available seven days a week to help you through the process of quitting—call Quitline 13 QUIT (13 7848) for free information, practical assistance and support.

• Talk to your health professional. Discuss quitting smoking with a general practitioner (GP), pharmacist or community health worker, and plan your quit strategy together.

• Consider using pharmacotherapy. Different products are available to help you quit smoking. Nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) includes patches, gum, lozenges, inhalers and mouth spray. The aim of NRT products is to replace some of the nicotine from cigarettes without the harmful chemicals found in tobacco smoke, thus reducing withdrawal symptoms, such as cravings and anxiety. Bupropion Hcl and Varenicline are non-nicotine medications that are also effective in helping smokers to quit. Bupropion Hcl and Varenicline are available only on prescription and your GP can help decide if they are suitable for you.
Health effects of smoking

Smoking is the major cause of lung cancer and causes cancers of the cervix, mouth, throat, bladder, pancreas, kidneys and stomach. It has also been suggested that smoking could cause cancer of the uterus, colon and liver. Smoking is also a major cause of heart disease and lung disease.

Making healthy choices, such as quitting smoking, eating healthy foods and avoiding alcohol when you are pregnant will not only make you feel better, but will give your baby a great start to life.

Common fears and fallacies

There’s nothing wrong with having a low birthweight baby—it just means a quicker and easier birth.

Having a low birthweight baby does not make things easier for you or your baby during birth. A smaller baby is more likely to become distressed, leading to a more complicated delivery. Labour with a low birthweight baby is no easier or shorter than labour with an average birthweight baby. Low birthweight may also mean that your baby is not fully developed (foetal growth retardation).

Smoking relaxes me and being relaxed is better for my baby.

Smoking may calm you down, but it also speeds up your heart rate, increases your blood pressure and depresses your nervous system. Every time you inhale tobacco smoke the carbon monoxide level in your bloodstream increases. This replaces oxygen in your blood, reducing the amount of oxygen available to your baby. This is definitely not better for your baby. The feeling of relaxation experienced by many smokers is due to the nicotine in tobacco alleviating nicotine withdrawals and because of the actual time taken to have a cigarette.

I’m already three months pregnant. What’s the point of stopping now? The damage is done.

Quitting at any stage during your pregnancy will reduce the harmful effects of smoking on your baby. If you quit now, your risk of having a low birthweight baby will be similar to that of a non-smoker. There are other advantages to quitting, such as financial advantages. Planning for the arrival of your new baby can be an expensive process and every dollar will count.

Cutting down during pregnancy is good enough.

Every little bit you cut down helps, but even a few cigarettes a day means many chemicals will be in your growing baby’s food supply and will reduce your own health when you need it most. There is no safe level of smoking. Planning to quit as early as you can means a better start to life for your baby.

If I stop smoking I’ll put on too much weight.

During pregnancy you will need more energy and nutrition to cope with the needs of your growing baby and to maintain your own health. Weight gain may occur when you quit smoking because you are no longer absorbing nicotine into your bloodstream. Nicotine suppresses appetite and you may find you eat more after you quit. Eating a balanced diet is one of the best ways to stay within a healthy weight range. Being active will also help your body adjust to being without cigarettes and to pregnancy. Not everyone gains weight when they quit smoking, but if you feel weight gain is a problem, discuss this with your health professional.

Smoking during pregnancy causes many complications, including:

• a higher risk of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS)
• an increased risk of miscarriage
• a higher likelihood of having a low birthweight baby—low birthweight babies are more vulnerable to health problems in infancy and early childhood, compared to average birthweight babies
• an increased risk of premature labour—premature babies are susceptible to infection and breathing difficulties because their internal organs are not properly developed
• a higher risk of complications during childbirth
• a higher likelihood of your child experiencing problems with lung and brain development and function
• an increased chance of perinatal death (the baby dying at or shortly after birth).

Making healthy choices, such as quitting smoking, eating healthy foods and avoiding alcohol when you are pregnant will not only make you feel better, but will give your baby a great start to life.