Prescription Opioids in Pregnancy

According to a recently published fact sheet from the Organization of Teratology Information Specialists (OTIS), there may be important risk factors associated with the recreational use of prescription opioids during pregnancy. The following questions were considered by OTIS:

- Can taking opioids increase the risk for miscarriage? No. There is no indication that occasional use of prescribed opioids increases the risk of miscarriage.

- Do opioids cause birth defects when used in early pregnancy? Some studies have suggested that opioid exposure in the first trimester may be associated with heart defects and other birth defects. Based on these studies the risk appears quite small. Several other studies have not supported an increased risk for heart defects or birth defects in general. Presently, taking opioids as prescribed does not appear to significantly change a woman’s risk for birth defects.

- Will an infant experience withdrawal if the mother uses opioids until delivery? Some babies do have withdrawal signs. The length of time and the amount of medication can influence the likelihood of withdrawal in the newborn. It is important that the doctors involved in delivery are aware of the use of an opioid medication.

- What does withdrawal look like in a newborn prenatally exposed to opioids? Withdrawal usually begins within the first 24 hours after birth, but can occur up to
two weeks later. Signs may include difficulty breathing, extreme drowsiness, poor feeding, irritability, sweating, tremors, vomiting and diarrhea. Occasionally seizures and death have occurred in severe, untreated cases of withdrawal. With proper treatment most babies can be supported through the withdrawal process. Withdrawal in the newborn does not appear to be associated with any long term complications.

❖ *What are the long term effects on children prenatally exposed to opioids?* There are no long term studies of children who were prenatally exposed to opioids, but no long term complications have been noted.

For more information regarding prescription opioid use during pregnancy, please visit OTIS’ website at [www.OTISpregnancy.org](http://www.OTISpregnancy.org). For further information regarding this article or other prenatal exposure issues, please contact Karen Kuehn Howell, Ph.D., at the Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project, Emory University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, 1256 Briarcliff Road, M.E.,320W, Atlanta, Georgia, 30306. You can also phone us at 404-712-9800 or visit our website at [http://www.emory.edu/MSACD](http://www.emory.edu/MSACD).

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