The Effects of Smoking During Pregnancy

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The widespread use of tobacco products is a major public health concern in this nation. Smoking leads to many health problems, including heart disease, various types of cancer, and emphysema, and can lead to premature death. Women who smoke while pregnant increase the risk of medical complications in the unborn child.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) estimates that 20 percent or more of women smoke while they are pregnant. The negative effects of smoking can impact a fetus during every trimester. Nicotine is easily absorbed by the placenta and nicotine levels in the fetus can be as much as 15 percent higher than levels in the mother. There is evidence that carbon monoxide, inhaled with tobacco smoke, interferes with the supply of oxygen to the fetus. These factors likely explain the developmental delays seen in the infants of smoking mothers.

One major risk from smoking during pregnancy is premature delivery. This leads to low birth weight and immediate medical complications. Infants carried to term by a smoking mother are also at increased risk for lower birth weight. There appears to be a relationship between the amount a woman smokes and infant birth weight: the more cigarettes smoked, the greater the deficit in weight. For women who quit smoking while pregnant, the risk for having a baby with low birth weight is comparable to that of non-smoking mothers.

A review of the research on smoking during pregnancy reveals higher mortality rates in infants born to women who smoke. The U.S. Surgeon General reports that women who smoke during pregnancy have a 25% to 50% higher rate of fetal and infant death than women who do not smoke. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, infants of mothers
who smoked during pregnancy are more likely to die from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), when compared to infants whose mothers did not smoke.

Smoking has negative implications for reproduction even before conception. Women who smoke have a more difficult time conceiving than women who do not smoke. Spontaneous abortions and miscarriages are also more common among women who smoke. The risk for death, particularly SIDS, is increased in children born to women who smoke. Quitting smoking, even during pregnancy, can decrease these risks significantly.

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