

Substance Use during Pregnancy: The Facts

Approximately 11% of pregnant women in the U.S. use drugs and/or alcohol during their pregnancy.

Substance Use by Pregnant Women & Girls in the U.S.				
	15-17 yrs	18-25 yrs	26-44 yrs	15-44 yrs
Alcohol ¹	15.8 %	9.8 %	12.5%	11.6 %
Average # of drinks consumed on days alcohol used	3.6	3.6	1.7	
Tobacco ²	24.3 %	27.1 %	10.6%	17.3%
Non-medical use prescription medication ³	18.2%	9.6%	2.9%	6%
Illicit Drug	8%		1.6%	4.3%

Of the 104,990 babies born in Virginia (to women age 15-44) in 2008, at least 11,549 were exposed to alcohol and/or drugs in utero:

- 12,178 were exposed to alcohol in utero,
- 6,299 were exposed to the non-medical use of prescription medications and
- 4,514 were exposed to an illicit substance (e.g., heroin, cocaine, etc.)

Any use of drugs or alcohol during pregnancy may adversely affect the health and well being of a newborn as well as impact the mother's health. Interrupting a woman's substance use and providing comprehensive services for both the mother and child can significantly improve birth outcomes as well as the child's later development. If a woman continues to use drugs or alcohol during her pregnancy, her unborn child is at high risk for:

- Premature delivery
- Low birth weight
- Neurological & congenital problems
- Increased risk of SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome)
- Developmental delays
- Neglect or abuse (substance-exposed newborns are at 2 –3 times higher risk than non-exposed infants)
- Mental health & substance abuse problems as they age.

Women want what is best for their child; the majority stops or reduces their substance use when they learn they are pregnant. However, some women are not aware that their use may be harmful to their unborn child while others may be addicted and unable to stop their use without additional support and treatment.

Women from all racial, ethnic, religious and socioeconomic groups use substances during pregnancy. We know most regarding those women who have received substance

¹ *Alcohol Use Among Pregnant Women & Recent Mothers 2002-2007* [National Survey Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) : 9/2/2008]

² *Cigarette Use Among Pregnant Women and Recent Mothers* (NSDUH: 2/9/2007)

³ Chapter "Misuse of prescription drugs by pregnancy status" at <http://oas.samhsa.gov/Women.htm>

abuse treatment services through publicly funded programs. Research indicates that these women are likely to have:

- Co-occurring mental health disorders
- Experienced trauma as a child &/or adult
- Little/no health coverage or be on Medicaid
- Unstable housing &/or be impoverished
- Experienced partner &/or community violence
- Legal problems

Poly drug use tends to be the norm. Although much attention has focused on the use of illicit drugs such as cocaine, heroin, or methamphetamines during pregnancy, research shows that alcohol and tobacco are the substances most frequently used by pregnant women as well as those that are the most harmful to the unborn child. Recent studies have found that pregnant women are also more likely to abuse prescription medications (6%) than use illicit drugs (4.3%).

In many cases screening and a brief intervention may be sufficient to help a woman interrupt her use. (See [Screening and Brief Intervention Services](#) to learn more). In other situations women may require additional assessment, referral and/treatment services.

Many substance using women engage in other risky behaviors that also impact their unborn child. A “high risk” screening which addresses substance use, mental health issues and intimate partner violence is most effective.

Many women resume substance use within the first 3 months after childbirth. Most women who stop using alcohol or drugs during their pregnancy resume use within the first year after they deliver. The most dramatic increases in substance use occurs within the first 3 months postpartum.^{4 5}

A woman’s pattern of use prior to her pregnancy is a good indicator of how she may use after she delivers. Women who abused substances prior to pregnancy are at risk of abusing them postpartum - placing their health and well-being, as well as that of their child, at risk.

Over 8.3 million children (11.9%) lived with at least one parent who was dependent on or abused alcohol or an illicit drug during the past year; of this number, 3.4 million lived with a mother who met criteria for abuse or dependence on alcohol and/or an illicit drug.⁶

⁴ *Substance Use During Pregnancy: 2002 and 2003 Update*, NSDUH, 6/2/2005

⁵ *Substance Use among Women During Pregnancy and Following Childbirth*, NSDUH 5/21/ 2009

⁶ *Children Living with Substance-Dependent or Substance-Abusing Parents: 2002 to 2007*, NSDUH 4/16/2009