3 Facts, and 3 Myths about Opiate Use During Pregnancy

Opiates are medications and street drugs that make you feel less pain and can cause a “high.” Opiates include Vicodin, OxyContin, morphine, methadone, fentanyl, and heroin. Opiates are very addictive. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in 2014 almost 2 million Americans were addicted to prescription opiates. Abusing prescription opiates can lead to many problems, including all too frequent death from overdose. From 1999 to 2014 over 165,000 people died from prescription opiate overdose alone. Overdose deaths from heroin have increased 6 times from 2001 to 2014. Pregnant women can also be addicted to prescription opiates or heroin.

What do you need to know about opiate use during pregnancy? Read below to learn the facts from the myths.

Fact: abusing opiates during pregnancy can hurt the baby
Abusing opiates during pregnancy can stunt your baby’s growth, cause you to go into labor too early, cause your placenta to detach from the wall of your uterus (abruptio placentae), and can even cause your baby to die in the womb.

Fact: babies exposed to opiates in the womb can go through withdrawal when they are born
If you use opiates in the third trimester your baby may also be born addicted to opiates. This can cause problems with your baby’s sleep, breathing, and digestion. Your baby might also be irritable, cry more frequently, sweat, be over active, and be stiff. Your baby may have to stay in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) and/or be given low doses of opiates to wean her off of the drug.

Fact: abusing prescription opiates or using heroin can cause other problems for you and your family
Using heroin and abusing prescription drugs is illegal and can lead to problems with the law and even incarceration. Many people addicted to prescription opiates or heroin and their families experience financial hardship because of the money spend on drugs. Abusing drugs can put you at risk of contracting HIV, hepatitis, or other health problems.
**Myth: I should quit opiates “cold turkey” when I find out I’m pregnant**

Stopping use of opiates during pregnancy can cause serious problems for you and your baby, including death. The best thing to do is work with your health provider who can put you on a safer opiate, like methadone, during your pregnancy.

**Myth: taking opiates during pregnancy is proven to cause birth defects**

We don’t know if using opiates during pregnancy causes birth defects. Some studies show higher risk of heart defects if you take opiates in the first trimester, other studies have not found this to be true. If there is a risk for birth defects, it is probably small.

**Myth: no one can help me with my addiction**

There are ways to recover from addiction and have a healthy pregnancy and baby. If you or a loved one is facing addiction you can call the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s 24-hour, confidential National Helpline at 1-800-662-HELP (4357). English or Spanish-speaking staff will take your call and refer you to local treatment facilities, support groups, and community-based organizations that can help.

You can also call MotherToBaby toll-free at (866) 626-6847 to get up to date information on opiates and pregnancy.

For further information regarding this issue please contact Bethany Kotlar at the Center for Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development, Emory University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, 12 Executive Park Drive NE, Atlanta, Georgia, 30329. You can also phone us at 404-712-6101 or visit our website at [http://www.emory.edu/MSACD](http://www.emory.edu/MSACD)

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