

Cannabis use in pregnancy



Maternity Unit

Talking about cannabis use in pregnancy with your midwife or obstetrician may feel difficult. This leaflet is designed to inform you of the risks involved and how you can get further support.

Cannabis risks for all:

Short-term side effects;

- faint, dizzy, lethargic, confusion/paranoia, panic attacks, reduced attention span, impact on coordination, increased appetite

Long-term side effects;

- risk of addiction and withdrawal symptoms (restless, difficulty sleeping, irritability, mood swings)
- Developing mental health problems
- Lung-related diseases; bronchitis, cancer, (additional risk if smoked with tobacco)
- Reduced fertility; cannabis use can impact on sperm production and ovulation
- Increased risk of cardiovascular disease and stroke

Cannabis and mental health

Using cannabis may trigger mental health problems even if you have never suffered with any before. If you already have ongoing mental health problems, or if you have a family history of mental health disorders, cannabis use can increase your risk of developing more severe symptoms. Recent research has shown that the younger you are when you start using cannabis, the greater the risk of mental health issues due to the effect on the developing brain.

Cannabis in pregnancy

There is limited reliable research and as with many drugs and medicines, there is more research needed to fully explore the effects of using cannabis in pregnancy. However there is enough to suggest that it may be harmful to you and your unborn baby during pregnancy and well into childhood.

The risks as we currently understand them are:

- low birth weight
- reduced alertness and
- slower growth
- Cannabis has not been linked to birth defects however, the effects on the developing brain may be lasting, and remain as the baby grows to an adolescent. There may be an association with learning and behavioural difficulties in children who were exposed to cannabis during pregnancy.

As cannabis is usually smoked with tobacco, the risks to the baby also include the same as smoking including the reduction in oxygen and nutrition via the placenta as well as:

- Increased risk of asthma/breathing conditions
- Increased risk of SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome)
- Increased risk of pregnancy and birth complications
- Pre-term delivery

Newborn care

After it is born your baby will be seen by a paediatrician to ensure he/she is well (as is routinely recommended for all babies). Some babies may be irritable, unsettled and difficulties feeding for a period of time if you have been using cannabis during your pregnancy. This may mean you need to stay in hospital a little longer to ensure baby settles and starts to feed effectively.

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Cannabis and breastfeeding

We know that a chemical called TCH (tetrahydrocannabinol) passes to your baby through maternal breast milk. Some studies suggests that infants exposed to this have impacts their motor development (movements and responses). However, more studies are needed to establish the true effects of cannabis on breastfeeding.

Breastfeeding is considered the healthiest choice to feed your baby, professional recommendation would be to stop smoking cannabis whilst breastfeeding.

Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS)

The risk of SIDS is greater if you smoke or use drugs and alcohol in pregnancy or after birth.

Ways to reduce the risk include:

- Do not share a bed with your baby as drugs and alcohol can make you more sleepy and less likely to be responsive to your baby's needs
- Provide a smoke free environment for your baby: no smoking in enclosed areas, don't allow people to smoke around your baby/avoid smoky areas, cover hair and change clothes after smoking, wash hands and face after smoking

There is lots more advice and information on ways to reduce risk on the following: www.nhs.uk/conditions/sudden-infant-death-syndrome

Effects on parenting

Being under the influence of cannabis while parenting can affect how you interact with your child.

- You may miss your baby's/child's cues for hunger, to be comforted, or to play and learn.
- It can also affect your ability to judge, to make good decisions and to protect your child from danger.

The effects of cannabis **can last for several hours**. Be sure that there is always someone available who is not under the influence of substances to take care of your child's needs.

Being attentive to your baby/child is important to their development. It is through relationships with you, and other adults that your child learns to trust, learn and thrive.

Recommendations

- Professional recommendation is that you discontinue smoking cannabis when you are pregnant and breastfeeding in order to have the healthiest pregnancy and early childhood.
- Talking about cannabis use in pregnancy with your midwife or consultant can be difficult but it is important to be open and honest so that we can provide the most appropriate care for you and your baby. Additional monitoring of your baby's growth and development may be needed.
- Attending ante-natal appointments -these services are here to help you and your baby stay as healthy as possible.

Further advice and support

Pregnancy can be a good motivator to stop cannabis use and make positive lifestyle changes and there is support available to help you to do this:

- **Somerset Drugs and Alcohol Service (SDAS)** - you/your partner can self refer: www.turning-point.co.uk/sdas Tel: 0300 303 87 88 (24/7) email: sdas@turning-point.co.uk. The website also has lots of useful 'self- help' information on here too
- **Acorn team** - please speak to your community midwife about accessing additional support from the complex care midwives around substances/alcohol use
- **Labour ward** - 01935 384350 at any time if you have any concerns about your or your baby's health during pregnancy/early postnatal period
- **Smoking cessation** - please speak to your community midwife about referral to specialist smoking cessation support during pregnancy for you/your partner

If you would like this information in another format or a different language, please ask a member of staff.