

The Truth About Substance Use and Pregnancy

Substance Use

When someone uses substances – like alcohol or drugs – it can cause them to have health issues. It can also cause problems at work, school, or home. Even though they may want to stop, it is difficult. Why? Substances change the way our brain works.

Fortunately, substance use disorders are common medical conditions that people can and do recover from.

How Do People Become Addicted to Substances?

Substances change the way our brain works. They also change the way we think. One of the first brain changes that happens is that substances take over the part of our brain that controls our cravings. Soon people find themselves taking substances more often and in larger amounts.

Signs Someone May Have a Substance Use Disorder

-  Feeling the need to take a substance even though you may want to quit
-  Needing to take higher amounts of a substance to feel relief
-  Spending a lot of time getting, using, and recovering from a substance
-  Not able to participate in normal work, home, or school responsibilities
-  Experiencing withdrawal symptoms (like sweating, shaking, and moodiness) when a substance wears off

Substance Use and Pregnancy

Taking substances during pregnancy can harm the baby and pregnant person. Many substances taken during pregnancy can also reach the baby. Once the baby is born, the baby can go through withdrawal.

Symptoms of withdrawal in babies include:

-  Difficulty breathing
-  Fussiness
-  Sleep issues - like sleeping too much or too little
-  Diarrhea or throwing up
-  Trouble feeding
-  Difficulty gaining weight
-  Fever, sweating, and blotchy skin

Effects of Substances on Babies

Babies exposed to substances may have long-lasting problems, like:

- Difficulty learning
- Breathing and heart problems
- Trouble controlling their emotions, feelings, and behaviors
- Being at higher risk for sudden death as an infant



Getting Help

If you are worried that you or someone you love might be misusing substances, you are not alone. Fortunately, there are many people and treatments that can help.

1 **Step 1: Make an appointment at your local clinic – even if you feel nervous.**

A doctor, nurse, or other healthcare provider can help you decide what treatments are best for you, your baby, and your family. They can also connect you with important cultural and community supports.

2 **Step 2: Work with your healthcare provider to determine which treatments are right for you.**

Being pregnant and using substances can be stressful. Seeing a mental health counselor may help you feel better and change your behaviors. Also, depending on what substances you use, taking certain medications can help with cravings and withdrawal.

3 **Step 3: Let friends and family know what you are going through.**

Having a strong support system and participating in cultural and community events can help you take care of yourself and feel connected and loved.

4 **Step 4: Remember that it's ok to struggle as you work toward making a better life for you and your baby.**

We are all in the process of learning different life skills to be happier and healthier people. As your journey continues, so will your understanding of how to care for yourself and your family. We are all a work in progress.



Visit the Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board's website at indiancountryecho.org/family-care-plans-toolkit to learn more about substance use, getting help, and other important topics.