

Center for Behavioral Health Studies

Tobacco and Alcohol Use Among Pregnant Women

Given the potential harmful effects of tobacco and alcohol to human embryos and fetuses, substantial public health attention has been focused on tobacco and alcohol use among pregnant women.

A recent **National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA)** annual report contains data on the current use of tobacco and alcohol among pregnant women ages 15 to 44.

Prevalence of Use Among Pregnant Women

According to the NIDA report, of women ages 15 to 44 who were currently pregnant, about 17 percent reported the use of one or more tobacco products (cigarettes, smokeless tobacco, cigars, or pipes) in the past month.

Cigarettes were the most widely used tobacco product, with an estimated 416,000 pregnant women smoking cigarettes in the past month.

About 13 percent of pregnant women reported drinking alcohol in the past month, with 3 percent reporting "binge" alcohol use (drinking five or more drinks on the same occasion during the past 30 days).

These percentages translate to approximately 316,000 pregnant women who were alcohol users in the past month and 80,000 pregnant women who were binge drinkers.

Prevalence of Use One Year After Giving

Birth

NIDA data also indicates that reductions in tobacco and alcohol use in women during pregnancy are not permanent.

Approximately 30 percent of recent mothers who had a child less than one year old reported smoking cigarettes in the past month, which compares exactly to the rate for all non-pregnant women in this age group.

Binge drinking rates for recent mothers (16 percent) were also similar to the overall rate for non-pregnant women ages 15 to 44 (19 percent).

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome

Nearly 30 years ago, scientists first coined the term "fetal alcohol syndrome" (FAS) to describe a pattern of birth defects found in children of mothers who consumed alcohol during pregnancy.

Today, FAS remains the leading known preventable cause of mental retardation. Behavioral and neurological problems associated with prenatal alcohol exposure may lead to poor academic performance as well as legal and employment difficulties in adolescence and adulthood.

Progress has been made most notably in research aimed at understanding the basic mechanisms involved in the neurobiological damage that occurs in alcohol-exposed fetuses and in developing potential new therapies to prevent that damage.

However, the minimum quantity of alcohol required to produce adverse fetal consequences is still unknown.

In Summary



An overall decline in alcohol consumption has been noted among pregnant women following a brief intervention.

Such sessions, which can be conducted by a primary care provider, may include a discussion of the risks of maternal drinking as well as suggesting alternatives to alcohol use.

Pregnant women with high drinking levels may benefit from a 1 hour motivational interview focusing on the health of the

unborn child.

Pregnant women used tobacco and alcohol less often than non-pregnant women. However, many women only reduce or curtail their use of these substances while pregnant.

Despite attempts to increase public awareness of the risks involved, increasing numbers of women are drinking during pregnancy.

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