



NEW STUDY EXAMINES ILLICIT DRUG USE IN PREGNANCY

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Although any drug use during pregnancy can be harmful to the unborn child, a recent study has found that tobacco smoking by illicit drug users during pregnancy often compounds the problem. It also found that cannabis smoking caused significant health effects, something that has previously been downplayed.

Mothers in the stimulant group were the most likely to smoke heavily, with two-thirds smoking more than 10 cigarettes a day.

The study examined the effects of cannabis, opioids, and stimulants on the developing fetus and is the largest study yet recorded in the international literature on this topic.

The study conducted by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) at the University of New South Wales analysed a total of 416 834 live births over a 5-year period.

Although the consequences of drug use in pregnancy are known to be severe, to date we have only had limited population level information about the characteristics and health needs of women who use drugs in pregnancy and of their babies. Unfortunately, most previous research is based on small samples or single case studies.

Women who used these substances were younger, unmarried, had a higher number of previous pregnancies and almost universally lacked private insurance. They were also more likely to arrive for delivery unbooked. Taken together these factors indicate a highly disadvantaged group of young women who are not engaging with traditional antenatal services.

The Chief Investigator of the study, Dr Lucy Burns, Lecturer at NDARC believes that the findings clearly illustrate the need for increased research and funding in this area.

“We need to undertake further work with this group of women to determine the strategies that will increase the likelihood that they will engage early with antenatal services to ensure their health and the health of their unborn children,” said Dr Burns.

Chronic use of each of these drugs was found to have negative effects on the baby including higher rates of prematurity, and poor fetal growth. Babies born to women who used these substances were admitted to special care units and neonatal intensive care more often. This was the case even for cannabis, traditionally regarded as a less harmful drug. As cannabis is the most widely used of the illicit drugs this raises cause for concern.

Smoking rates were extremely high among these women, with approximately 85% smoking during their pregnancy, and most smoking occurring at high levels. Despite knowing the significant harms that tobacco smoking can have on the developing fetus and the child they grow, strategies to reduce smoking by these women have largely been ignored.

“This is a highly disadvantaged group who experience a wide range of social problems,” said Dr Burns. “Although this study focused on their drug use, it is important to remember that often their drug use is often a consequence of other societal factors that they have no control over.”

“We urgently need to focus on new and innovative ways to assist these women to reduce their problematic use of all drugs in pregnancy including tobacco. We need to engage them in antenatal services as early as possible and provide them with continuity of care throughout their pregnancies and in the longer term.”

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