AMERICAN COLLEGE OF Lifestyle Medicine

AVOIDANCE OF RISKY SUBSTANCES

# Avoiding Harmful Substances for Your Family



Substances such as alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, and recreational drugs are well-known toxins to the body. Substance use during pregnancy and after childbirth has significant health effects on children. Avoiding these substances in the first place eliminates the risk of addiction and harm to you and your baby. If you are currently using, the earlier you quit, the greater the positive impact you will experience. When you are ready to quit, it's best to seek support from family, friends, community resources, and a clinical care team to assist in this journey. This handout outlines commonly used substances, potential effects on infants and young children, and strategies for improving health. Keeping your home free of harmful substances protects your health and your child's health.



# Alcohol



## DURING PREGNANCY:

- Alcohol passes from your blood to your baby through the placenta.
- Drinking while pregnant can cause miscarriage, early birth, or low birth weight.
- There is **no safe amount or type of alcohol** during pregnancy.[1]
- Heavy drinking can lead to **Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)**, which can cause growth problems and learning delays.[2,3]

## WHILE BREASTFEEDING:

- Alcohol passes into breast milk and can affect your baby's sleep and development.
- Wait **at least 2 hours per drink** before breastfeeding again. "Pumping and dumping" is a myth. Throwing away breast milk does not help your body clear alcohol faster.[4]
- It's safest not to drink at all while breastfeeding.

## AS A PARENT:

- Alcohol affects your alertness and judgment, which can make it harder to care for your baby safely.
- Children notice adult habits — what they see teaches them what's "normal."

# Tobacco and Vaping



## DURING PREGNANCY:

- Tobacco lowers oxygen to your baby and can cause early birth, low birth weight, or birth defects.
- Smoking or vaping increases the risk of **Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS)**.[5]
- Even being around smoke (secondhand smoke) is harmful for both you and your baby.

## AROUND YOUR BABY:

- Secondhand smoke stays in the air — even in another room or with windows open.
- It causes breathing problems, ear infections, and worsens asthma.[6]
- **Thirdhand smoke** (the smell that stays on clothes and furniture) is also dangerous.

## BEST CHOICES:

- Don't smoke or vape near children or inside your home or car.
- Change clothes and wash hands before holding your baby if you have smoked.
- If you smoke, talk to your doctor or call **1-800-QUIT-NOW** for free help to quit.

# Cannabis (Marijuana)



## DURING PREGNANCY:

- THC, the active ingredient in marijuana, passes through the placenta to your baby.
- It can affect brain development and increase the risk of learning and behavior problems later.[7]

## WHILE BREASTFEEDING:

- THC passes into breast milk and stays in your baby's body for a long time.
- The safest choice is to avoid cannabis while breastfeeding.

## AS A PARENT:

- Cannabis can make you sleepy or less alert, which can make it harder to safely care for your child.
- Kids learn by watching you — your choices shape their future habits.

# Other Drugs and Misused Medicines



## DURING PREGNANCY:

- Using opioids, cocaine, heroin, or misusing prescription pills can cause serious problems for your baby — including early birth, birth defects, or even loss of the pregnancy.
- Babies born to mothers who use opioids may have **Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS)**, meaning they experience withdrawal after birth.[5]

## WHILE BREASTFEEDING:

- Most drugs pass into breast milk and can harm your baby's heart, lungs, or brain.
- If you use drugs, do **not** breastfeed until you have stopped and talked with your doctor.

## KEEPING KIDS SAFE:

- Keep all medicines in childproof containers and out of reach.
- Never leave pills, vapes, or needles where children can find them.

## IF YOU NEED HELP:

- You're not alone. Addiction is a health issue, not a moral failure.
- Talk to your doctor or call the **SAMHSA Helpline: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)** for free, private support.
- Treatment and recovery programs can help you and your baby stay healthy.

## Remember

Making healthy choices during pregnancy and beyond protects your baby's body and brain for life.

Ask your healthcare team for help if you're struggling to quit or cut back — support works and you deserve it.



## Tips for Parents

1. Talk openly about healthy habits as your child grows.
2. Keep alcohol, tobacco, and drugs out of reach.
3. Model healthy choices—kids learn from what you do.



## Need help or support?

**Visit:** www.samhsa.gov/families

**Alcoholics Anonymous:** www.aa.org

**Quit Smoking Help:** 1-800-QUIT-NOW

References