

## Stop Abusing the Unborn

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THE THOUGHT OF FEEDING BABIES with any substance of dubious origin is really unthinkable. Even in the case of medicines, the general advice is to avoid using them where possible. The intention is of course is to protect the baby from unwarranted injuries. Thus, there is a set of very stringent regulations that must be complied with before a drug could be marketed for use, especially to pregnant mothers.

During the Thalidomide tragedy, involving a purported 'safe' drug, many expectant mothers learned a very painful lesson because their babies were exposed to its toxic effects.

Unfortunately, when it comes to the use of tobacco and alcohol, despite the well-documented harmful effects even in adults, such protection is not emphasised. The unborn continue to be exposed to these poisons intentionally or otherwise. This is one form of child abuse that has escaped our attention for too long.

Each time pregnant mothers smoke or drink, they are forcing it down on their babies. Even if the substance is relatively "safe" for a full-grown adult, it doesn't mean that it's necessarily safe for babies.

Many people are not aware of how vulnerable babies are when they are in the womb. For example, the brain, heart and blood vessels of a child starts to develop as early as the third week of pregnancy. The heart begins to beat a week later.

Unlike adult, their organ systems are very much less developed and therefore easily damaged. Thus, subjecting them to any well recognised dangerous substances could amount to violating their rights to live.

The excuse that one smokes or drinks for social reasons is not enough because the risk to the child could far-reaching. We simply do not know for sure how "safe" these substances are on babies despite occasional claims that a little is okay. What we know for sure is that from the very moment of conception, the baby's organs start to form.

Poisonous substances such as alcohol and those found in tobacco can cause irreversible damage, especially when they can readily cross the placenta. Alcoholic drinks for example, can induce a condition called Foetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS).

Although often unheard of, FAS is not as uncommon as many would think. It has been estimated by the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention of the United States that one out of every 750 babies born suffers from the Syndrome.

FAS babies are abnormally small at birth, especially in head size. Unlike other small newborns, few of these children have a normal growth pattern. Most of them have small brains and show some amount of mental retardation. Many are jittery and poorly coordinated. They have short attention spans and often develop behavioural problems. Their mental problems may not improve with age. This can lead to learning disabilities and other physical problems.

Likewise, smoking poses serious health problems for the expectant mother and the unborn child. The expectant mothers apart, from being at risk personally of developing cancers, respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, also endangers the life of her unborn baby.

The child may be born with low birth weight, premature and may even be stillborn. Those that survive are at increased risk of asthma and infections.

The long-term effects of smoking in children may be irreversible and may not be apparent until they reach adolescence. As was reported before, smoking mothers have a higher risk of miscarriage and the babbies of smoking mothers have five times the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) or cot death, in the first week of life.

### Smoking and reproductive health:

- Babies born to women who smoke during pregnancy weigh significantly less than babies of non-smokers (some have a lower chance of survival and are more susceptible to infections). Low birth-weight is the major factor associated with death of infants in the first month of life.
- Children 6-24 months old of parents who smoke tend to have more ear infections and respiratory problems (from passive smoke breathed in the home).
- Smoking during pregnancy increases chances of infant death during the first month of life.
- Smoking during pregnancy causes higher rates of spontaneous abortion (about 10,000 spontaneous abortions each year in the United States are attributable to smoking).
- Smoking during pregnancy shortens gestation (in the United States, more than 10% of all premature births are attributable to smoking).

- Women who smoke are three times more likely to be infertile than non-smokers.
- Women smokers have more difficulty conceiving than non-smokers.
- Women who smoke during pregnancy have more frequent complications of labour and delivery than non-smokers.
- Women who smoke undergo earlier menopause and in general are relatively deficient in the hormone estrogen.
- Women over 30 who smoke and use oral contraceptives have an increased risk of developing cardiovascular problems.
- Smoking may impair the ability of intrauterine devices (IUDs) to prevent pregnancy.
- Women who smoke more than double their risk of contracting cervical cancer.

Birth defects induced by cigarette smoking and alcohol is totally preventable and can be avoided. Expectant mothers are the ones who can be the most effective in ensuring just that. All that needs to be done is to defer from using the substances, at least until the baby is born and to keep the baby from being exposed to cigarette smoke during this period.

However, since most women do not know that they are pregnant until some weeks have passed, it is better to stop smoking or drinking when you decide to become pregnant, better still do not start at all. It cannot be over-emphasised that defects induced by such substances will last forever because it may be too late for any cure.

Just ask ourselves this: would we lace the food of our newborns with tobacco or alcohol? Despite this, the trend seems to indicate that many more women are involved in smoking and/or drinking. This is indeed unfortunate.

How long must we let the innocent be abused even before they are born?

It is time to take some positive actions. While the nation is seriously considering tougher measures to protect children from being abused, the unborn must not be forgotten. They too need similar protection.

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