



Oxford University Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Cannabis use in pregnancy

Information leaflet



We are seeing an increasing use of cannabis amongst expectant mothers. Many of them will choose to quit cannabis during pregnancy which is of great benefit for both mum and baby. We are able to provide support with helping to stop using cannabis.

This leaflet provides information on the help and support that is available for pregnant people who presently use cannabis and wish to stop.

In the past, cannabis use in pregnancy was assumed to be harmless. This was because not much was known about the potential risks to the mother and the unborn baby. A growing body of evidence suggests that cannabis use in pregnancy may cause harm to an unborn baby during pregnancy and also after birth and into childhood.

Most of the cannabis available in the UK today contains higher levels of THC (Delta 9 Tetrahydrocannabinol) than in the past. THC is the chemical that gives the 'high' feeling, but it also increases the chance of dependency and problematic side-effects. When Cannabis is smoked, it's estimated to give off three times more tar and five times more carbon monoxide than smoking a tobacco cigarette.

There is no known safe level of use of cannabis in pregnancy. If you have already used cannabis during your pregnancy, the best thing you can do to support the baby's wellbeing is to avoid any further use and if needed, seek help to stop as soon as possible.

Talking to your midwife about cannabis use in pregnancy might feel difficult/uncomfortable, but it is important to be open and honest to ensure that you and your baby are offered the appropriate care and support at the earliest opportunity. All disclosures of cannabis use are treated non-judgementally.

Your midwife will be able to help you access further support to help you stop using cannabis.

Turning Point are a specialist organisation who can provide practical support to help you give up cannabis, which will greatly increase your chance of successfully stopping.

We also have a specialist maternity tobacco dependency service. Many people access this service in recognition of pregnancy being a great time to take the step to quit smoking.

Risks for baby during pregnancy and birth

When you use cannabis, so does your baby. Cannabis crosses the placenta to the developing baby.

Risks to the baby include:

- Low birth weight.
- Pre-term (early) birth.
- Increased chance of needing care in the Neonatal Unit.
- Reduced alertness.
- Learning, behavioural, mental health and substance use problems in childhood due to cannabis affecting the baby's brain during the period of critical development.

As cannabis is usually smoked with tobacco, the risks to baby also include the effects of exposure to the harmful effects that result from a mother that smokes during pregnancy:

- Increased chance of miscarriage or stillbirth.
- Increased chance of pregnancy and birth complications.
- Increased chance of asthma and breathing conditions.
- Increased chance of SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome).

Risks for you

Short-term effects:

- Dizziness /Faintness /Lethargy /Confusion or Paranoia /Panic attacks / Anxiety /Reduced attention span /Impact on coordination / Increased appetite.
- Some people feel that cannabis helps relieve nausea in pregnancy, but sometimes it actually makes it much worse. Cannabis hyperemesis syndrome can occur in people who smoke cannabis while pregnant. These people experience severe nausea and vomiting that requires treatment, part of which is to stop cannabis use.

Long-term effects:

- Cannabis may trigger the onset of mental health problems or heighten any pre-existing mental health issues you may have.
- Risk of addiction and withdrawal symptoms including, restlessness, difficulty sleeping, irritability and mood swings.
- Lung related diseases such as Bronchitis or lung cancer.
- Reduced fertility.
- Increased risk of cardiovascular disease and stroke.

Risks to the newborn

Some babies that are exposed to the effects of cannabis during pregnancy may be irritable after birth. They may be difficult to settle and may have difficulties feeding during the newborn period.

Breastfeeding

Breast feeding is the ideal way to feed a baby and has many health benefits for mother and baby. As cannabis passes freely into breastmilk the recommendation is not to use cannabis whilst breastfeeding. This is because, amongst other reasons, the active component in cannabis collects in fat stores where it can remain in your baby's body for several weeks.

Effects on parenting

Being under the influence of cannabis while parenting can affect how you interact with your child. The effects of cannabis can last for several hours. If you are using cannabis, you must ensure that there is always someone available who is not under the influence of this (or any other substance) to take care of your child's needs.

Risks of cannabis use whilst caring for a baby:

- You may miss the baby's cues (signs) that show you they are hungry.
- You may miss the baby's cues that show you they need to be comforted
- You may miss the baby's cues that show you they are ready to play and learn
- It can also impair your ability to drive a vehicle, to make good decisions, and to protect your child from danger.

Your partner

If your partner is using cannabis, they can also receive support to stop. It is important that pregnant people and babies are not exposed to second hand smoke. A risk to the baby of second hand exposure to smoke is sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).

Keeping your baby safe

Please let your midwife know if you are experiencing any difficulties which are impacting on your life, such as housing or financial difficulties. This is so we can help you to access the right support.

If you are struggling with cannabis use and/or any other issues, the extent to which it is affecting you and your ability to meet your baby's needs will need to be considered. In some circumstances and in partnership with you, this may mean a referral to children's services to ensure that you and your baby are safe.

Recommendations:

- Healthcare professional advice is to stop smoking cannabis when you are pregnant and breastfeeding. Pregnancy can be a good motivator towards helping to stop cannabis use and to make positive lifestyle changes.
- We understand it can be difficult to stop smoking cannabis, but it is important to keep trying- reducing is better than giving up trying to stop.
- It is important to provide a smoke-free environment for your child. Do not allow people to smoke around your baby/child.
- Change your clothes and wash your face and hands if you have been using cannabis/smoking.

Support for stopping cannabis use in pregnancy

Your community midwife can offer information about what support is available.

Turning Point

You can self-refer via the website address below or ask your midwife to refer you:

Website: www.turning-point.co.uk

For further information:

Talk to Frank provides honest information about drugs

Website: www.talktofrank.com

Telephone: 0300 1236600

Text: 82111

Further information

If you would like an interpreter, please speak to the department where you are being seen.

Please also tell them if you would like this information in another format, such as:

- Easy Read
- large print
- braille
- audio
- electronic
- another language.

We have tried to make the information in this leaflet meet your needs. If it does not meet your individual needs or situation, please speak to your healthcare team. They are happy to help.

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Making a difference across our hospitals

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