



About Opioid Use During Pregnancy



For Everyone

MAY 7, 2025

KEY POINTS

- Opioid use during pregnancy can affect mothers and babies.
- Opioids are a class of drugs used to reduce pain.
- It is important to be aware of the possible risks of opioid use during pregnancy, as well as treatment options including medication for opioid use disorder.



Overview

Opioid use during pregnancy can affect women and their babies. Pregnant women may use opioids as prescribed, may misuse prescription opioids, or may use illicit opioids such as heroin. It is important for people to be aware of the possible risks of opioid use during pregnancy, as well as treatment options including medications for opioid use disorder.

Opioids may also be used in combination with other substances. Use of more than one substance, also called polysubstance use, during pregnancy is common. Though the effects of polysubstance use on a developing baby are not well known, [substance use during pregnancy can have various effects on a developing baby](#).

Terms to know

Opioids

Opioids are a class of drugs used to reduce pain. A few examples of opioids are as follows:

- Common prescription opioids include, oxycodone, hydrocodone, morphine, and methadone.
- Fentanyl is a prescription synthetic opioid pain reliever. It can also be made illegally.
- Heroin is an illegal opioid.
- New synthetic substances are constantly introduced into the supply of illicit drugs. These new synthetic substances may not be detected with existing laboratory tests, and people who are taking them may not be aware of it.

Opioid use disorder (OUD)

Opioid use disorder (OUD), sometimes referred to as opioid addiction, is a problematic pattern of opioid use that causes significant impairment or distress. OUD was previously classified as opioid abuse or opioid dependence in DSM-IV criteria.

Medication for opioid use disorder (MOUD)

MOUD refers to the use of medicine to treat opioid use disorder. [Methadone](#) and [buprenorphine](#) are the primary medicines for pregnant women with OUD.

Neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS)

NAS is a group of conditions that can occur when newborns withdraw from certain substances, including opioids, that they were exposed to before birth.

Neonatal opioid withdrawal syndrome (NOWS)

NOWS is withdrawal among newborns during the first 28 days of life due to long-term exposure to opioids before birth. NOWS is a subset of NAS and is specific to opioid withdrawal during the first 28 days of life. Opioids given at the time of delivery do not cause NOWS.

Health outcomes from exposure during pregnancy

Opioid exposure during pregnancy has been linked to poor health for both mothers and babies. Opioid use disorder (OUD) has been linked to:

- [Maternal death](#)^[1] ^[2]
- Poor fetal growth
- [Preterm birth](#)
- [Stillbirth](#)
- Specific [birth defects](#)
- Neonatal abstinence syndrome ^[3] ^[4]

The effects of prenatal opioid exposure on children over time are largely unknown, including among those with or without neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS). Not all babies exposed to opioids during pregnancy experience signs of NAS, but there could be long-term effects on development that aren't obvious at birth. More research is needed to better understand the spectrum of possible outcomes related to opioid exposure during pregnancy.

Taking MOUD as prescribed during pregnancy has benefits that outweigh the risks. It is important for healthcare providers and pregnant women to work together to manage medical care, including substance use, during pregnancy and after delivery. Pregnant women should consult their physician before stopping or changing any prescribed medication.



It is important for healthcare providers and pregnant patients to work together to manage medical care.

Neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS)

Opioid use during pregnancy can lead to neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS) in some newborns. NAS is a group of conditions that can occur when newborns withdraw from certain substances, including opioids, that they were exposed to before birth.

Signs of withdrawal usually begin within 72 hours after birth and may include the following:

- Tremors (trembling) or seizures
- Sleep problems or irritability, including excessive or high-pitched crying
- Hyperactive reflexes
- Yawning, stuffy nose, or sneezing
- Poor feeding and sucking
- Loose stools and dehydration or vomiting
- Increased sweating

The signs a newborn might experience, and how severe the signs will be, depend on different factors. Some factors include the type and amount of substance the newborn was exposed to before birth, the last time a substance was used, whether the baby is born full-term or premature, and if the baby was exposed to other substances (for example, [alcohol](#)^[5], [tobacco](#)^[5] ^[6] ^[7], other medications ^[5] ^[6] ^[7] ^[8]) before birth.

Quick facts and stats

Opioid use during pregnancy

According to 2019 self-reported survey data, [about 7%](#) of women reported use of prescription opioid pain relievers during pregnancy. Of those, 1 in 5 reported misuse (defined by this survey as getting prescription opioid pain relievers from a source other than a healthcare provider or using them for a reason other than to relieve pain).[\[9\]](#)

Diagnoses at delivery

In the most recent [estimate](#) [↗](#) available, the number of women with opioid-related diagnoses documented at delivery increased by 131% from 2010 to 2017.[\[10\]](#)

Neonatal abstinence syndrome

According to 2020 data from the [Healthcare Cost and Utilization Project](#) [↗](#) (HCUP), about 6 newborns were diagnosed with neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS) for every 1,000 newborn hospital stays in the United States. That is about 1 baby diagnosed with NAS every 24 minutes, or more than 59 newborns diagnosed every day.

The number of babies born with NAS in the United States increased by 82% from 2010 to 2017. Increases were seen for nearly all states and demographic groups. The occurrence of NAS diagnoses per 1,000 newborn hospital stays ranged from 1 in Hawaii to 43 in West Virginia.

To learn more, use this [interactive map of NAS](#) [↗](#) to search by state.

Resources

CDC resources

- [Opioid Use and Pregnancy | Drug Overdose | CDC Injury Center](#)
- Rx Awareness [Treatment and Recovery](#)
- [Opioid Basics](#)
- Pregnancy and Opioid Pain Medications ([English](#) [PDF](#), [Spanish](#) [PDF](#))

More information

For information about the risks of specific opioid medications used during pregnancy, read MotherToBaby's [fact sheets](#). [↗](#) MotherToBaby experts are also available by phone or online chat to answer questions in English or Spanish. This free and confidential service is available Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. (local time). To reach MotherToBaby:

- Call 1-866-626-6847
- Chat live online via the [MotherToBaby website](#) [↗](#)
- Send an email via the [MotherToBaby website](#) [↗](#)

Find treatment

- [Find a health center for substance abuse services](#) [↗](#)
- [FindTreatment.gov](#) [↗](#)
- [Locator for physicians providing medication treatment for opioid use disorder](#) [↗](#)

SOURCES

CONTENT SOURCE:

[National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities \(NCBDDD\)](#)

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