

# Heroin & Pregnancy

The effects on Mother and Child



## Prenatal & Neonatal Complications

Heroin or Methadone use during pregnancy has serious consequences for the mother and baby at all stages of the pregnancy and even post-birth in the developing child.

Prenatal care is vital for all women, but essential for women using heroin.

### Risks for Mom:

- Irregular bleeding leading to miscarriage (usually third trimester).
- Low birth weight.
- Miscarriage.
- Preclampsia.
- Malnutrition.

### Risks for Unborn Baby:

- Risk of stillbirth is doubled.
- Damage to the placenta depriving the baby of oxygen or nutrition.
- Low birth weight (*with implications for later development*).

### Risks for New Born / Growing Child:

- Risk of cot-death increased.
- Behavioural disorders.
- Difficulty concentrating / attention.
- Hyperactivity.
- Aggressiveness.
- Lack of social inhibition.



## Symptoms

- Tremors / Trembling
- Excessive crying
- Sleep problems
- Tight/Clenched muscles
- Hyperactivity
- Seizures
- Yawning, stuffy nose
- Poor feeding & suck
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Dehydration
- Sweating
- Fever

## Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS) ...Cold Turkey for the Baby

### What is NAS?

Over half of babies exposed to heroin or methadone will experience cold turkey, *withdrawal*. Babies exposed to methadone can also have seizures.

Effects can begin as early as 24 hours after birth and can last up to 6 months.

Premature babies generally have a lower risk of NAS, have less symptoms and will recover more quickly.

### How do I help?

Ensure Mom attends prenatal appointments, and listen to what the doctors / midwives advise

Snugly wrapping the baby in a blanket will help to comfort him/her.

Due to hyperactivity baby will need extra calories. Also, ensure baby is fully hydrated, especially if (s)he has severe vomiting or diarrhea.

## Childhood Development

### Observations in NAS children from birth to 6 years

**TODDLERS:** Toddlers born to heroin and methadone users tend to be more easily distracted (ADHD) and have poor object manipulation as well as speech and visual problems and may have difficulty sleeping also.

**PRESCHOOL:** Pre-schoolers born to heroin and methadone users are more likely to display unwanted behaviour like yelling, teasing and bullying of other children. Children were found to have lower intelligence as well as difficulty adapting to new situations. They are usually of a lower height, weight and development than their peers.

Source: [www.stanfordchildrens.org/en/topic/default?id=neonatal-abstinence-syndrome-90-P02387](http://www.stanfordchildrens.org/en/topic/default?id=neonatal-abstinence-syndrome-90-P02387)

Also: [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2571530/pdf/jnma00263-0049.pdf](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2571530/pdf/jnma00263-0049.pdf)



## Detox using Methadone or Cold Turkey?

What's best for you and the baby?

### **The ideal would be for the Mom to stop taking drugs altogether.**

But because heroin is so addictive it is difficult to do. That's why Methadone will often be offered as a '*maintenance treatment*'.

Some Mom's will opt for a Methadone detox which involves slowly decreasing the amount of heroin until she gets down to zero use.

Withdrawal from methadone during pregnancy is not recommended, however under SA public treatment maintenance is not always an option.

Withdrawal is not advised before 14 weeks (due to increased risk of inducing abortion). Withdrawal should also not be done after 32 weeks because of possible withdrawal induced stress.

Although Methadone maintenance does not guarantee 'staying clean' it does reduce the risk of relapse. For this reason it is described as the 'gold standard' for pregnant heroin users.

The greatest concern for Methadone maintenance is the high risk of NAS.