Smoking during pregnancy more common among girls and young women under 35

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About 20%–30% of women still smoke during their pregnancy in Canada (1-4). However, younger women, under 20 years of age, are up to five times more likely to report smoking during their pregnancy than women over 35 (5). Although 30 – 40% of smokers quit during pregnancy 6, this is often brief, with nearly 70%–90% returning to smoking by one year after having a baby. (6) Many pregnant smokers who enroll in smoking cessation programs suspend their smoking for the duration of their pregnancy as opposed to quitting altogether (7) ; or they commit to "temporary abstinence" (8) instead of changing the way they view their smoking behaviour. However smoking cessation among pregnant girls and young women is not often addressed; possibly because of the double stigma related with teenage pregnancy (9) and smoking during pregnancy. (10)

So how do we encourage pregnant girls and young women to quit smoking? First of all, advice to quit smoking from health care providers can motivate girls and women to attempt to quit smoking (11, 12). Yet many health care providers still fail to address quitting with their patients (13) because they may feel unskilled to address the issue of smoking, or because they do not feel that they have the time for meaningful interventions (14, 15). It is important to encourage girls and women who are interested in quitting to engage their health care providers in talks about quitting smoking.

Second, many women who quit smoking during pregnancy do so for ‘the baby’ rather than for themselves. However, tobacco use can have harmful effects on girls and young women’s health and bodies beyond just harming the fetus. Girls and young women need to be encouraged to see quitting smoking as one important way to stay healthy and take care of their own health. Such encouragement can motivate, promote, and strengthen a commitment to permanent quitting.

Third, quitting smoking is a process in which girls and young women can experience some set-backs and relapses. Taking care of nutrition, exercise, and stress reduction as they go through the process of quitting can improve the chances of success for girls and young women.

Finally, avoiding secondhand tobacco smoke exposure and using positive support networks (such as friends, family members, supportive partners e.t.c.) can greatly affect the success of quitting smoking. It is important for girls and young women to consider more than one
approach to quitting smoking by using available counseling, group programs, and pharmacologic aids in discussion with their health care provider.

You can refer to our report Expecting to Quit,(16) which is an overview of better practices in addressing smoking during pregnancy. This resource is also available in French, Spanish and Portuguese (www.inwat.org). The British Columbia Centre of Excellence for Women's Health is currently engaged in updating our review of literature on interventions with pregnant smokers. You can check out tips to quit smoking or to help someone you know who is pregnant to quit smoking at the following sites:

1. www.tobaccofree.org/quit-smoking/index.html
2. www.lungusa.org
3. www.helpingyousmokersquit.org
4. www.helppregnantsmokersquit.org
5. www.smokefree.gov/quit-smoking/index.html

Acknowledgements:
The report ”Expecting to Quit: A best practices review of smoking cessation interventions for pregnant and postpartum girls and women” was funded by Health Canada.