

## My Health

**Many of our babies are being born underweight or are stillborn because women are smoking when they are pregnant.** It is a huge issue in Aboriginal Communities, and the statistics speak for themselves. Just compare the figures to non aboriginals, it's phenomenal. Read on to find out more.

### Tobacco Smoking

**Tobacco smoking causes more sickness and death than both alcohol and illicit drug use combined.** Each year more than 18,000 Australians die prematurely because of smoking.

In fact smoking is the leading preventable cause of sickness and death, particularly from heart disease; cancers of the lung, larynx and mouth; and emphysema.

In 2004, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare estimated that 17.4% of people aged 14 years and over smoked daily. Of particular concern is the smoking rate among rate among Aboriginal people, which in 2002 was reported to be 51% – more than double that of the wider community and this still stands today.

### Smoking while pregnant

Unfortunately, it is true that many pregnant women in Aboriginal communities also smoke. In 2004, around 57% of Aboriginal mothers reported smoking at some time during pregnancy, compared to 14% of non-Aboriginal mothers reported smoking at some time during pregnancy, compared to 14% of non-Aboriginal mothers.

**When you smoke, over 4,000 chemicals go into your body.** One of these is a poisonous gas called carbon monoxide which gets into the bloodstream and cuts down the oxygen reaching the baby. **For every cigarette you smoke, the blood flow to your baby is disrupted for about 15 seconds.**

### Risk Factors

Smoking while pregnant is very dangerous for the baby:

- **Smoking doubles the risk of having a low birth weight baby** and significantly increases the risk of the baby dying before or during birth.
- **There is an increased risk of miscarriage or stillbirth;** physical defects; premature birth and, therefore, less chance of the baby surviving; and of problems during the birth.
- **Babies whose mothers smoke are more likely to find it harder to fight infections;** to be restless and irritable; to have learning problems later in life; and are almost three times more likely to die of cot death.
- **Smoking during and after pregnancy increases the risk of the child developing respiratory problems** such as asthma, croup, bronchitis and pneumonia.
- **Premature labour is at an increased risk dur to smoking.** Premature babies are susceptible to infection and breathing difficulties because the baby's internal organs are still immature and not properly developed.

## **Giving up**

**The cravings, the irritability, the powerful urge to have “just one more” cigarette does not make giving up smoking easy.** But if you are pregnant, you probably know that giving up has never been more important.

Smoking at any time during your pregnancy is very harmful, but if you are finding it difficult to quit completely, even reducing to half your daily intake can help to start making a difference.

There are services and professionals that can offer a program to help support you or they will be able to assist you in taking the steps towards quitting. Going smoke free at any stage in your pregnancy is beneficial for your baby. **Giving up cigarettes can be much easier if you don't try to do it by yourself.** Support from friends and family can increase your chances of success.

## **Support**

If you are finding it difficult to cope with the cravings, you could try nicotine patches or gum. Although your baby will still be affected by the nicotine, the patches do not contain the toxic chemicals found in cigarettes. Talk to your doctor first – they can advise you on the best option and can give you a prescription for gum or patches so it doesn't have to cost you a fortune to be smoke-free<sup>1</sup>.

**There is a lot of help and support out there to help you give up smoking, and you and your baby will notice the benefits immediately.**

Contact your local Aboriginal Medical Service, Aboriginal Health Unit, Community Centre, or General Practitioner for advice and support. Otherwise Quitline offers a 24 hour services to smokers who wish to kick the habit by providing advice and assistance.

**For the cost of a local call from anywhere in Australia, Quitline is contactable on 131 848.**

*By Kelly Jackman  
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<sup>1</sup> Please note that my recommendations concerning nicotine patches and gum are that of the New South Wales Health Department, and practiced and advised by Aboriginal Health Units and Aboriginal Medical Services in New South Wales which stem from the results of national studies done mainly in West Australia, Northern Territory and Queensland.