



Substance-Exposed Infants: Fact Sheet

Babies exposed to drugs and alcohol during pregnancy may challenge those caring for them. Nurturing these babies and meeting their needs already has had a profound impact on their healing. Here are some facts about substance exposed infants that may help prepare caregivers for challenges they may face as they help these babies to grow and thrive.

Who are substance-exposed infants?

Substance exposed infants are babies whose biological mother took one or a combination of drugs, (such as heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine) or certain medicines (anti-anxiety medications/opioid pain medication/antidepressants) during pregnancy. Drinking alcohol during pregnancy can result in babies having specific birth defects in addition to developmental concerns. Smoking during pregnancy may also have similar effects.

What happens after they are born?

When a baby is born, these substances may cause short- or long-term effects. Short-term problems such as withdrawal symptoms occur because the supply of the substance is suddenly stopped. Long-term effects may include problems with development, learning and behavior throughout childhood, adolescence and adulthood.

What are some of the effects of substance exposure on infants and children?

Below are some examples of short and long-term problems substance-exposed babies may face. Please talk to your medical provider if you have any questions.



Rees-Jones Center for Foster Care Excellence

SHORT TERM IMPACT	LONG TERM IMPACT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low birth weight • Withdrawal symptoms: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Can be observed after the baby is born. ○ Can last a few weeks or a few months. ○ Babies may need medication for withdrawal symptoms. • Problems include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Irritability ○ Trouble sucking, eating, swallowing ○ Unable to take pacifier ○ Trouble Sleeping ○ Excessive yawning ○ High pitched cry ○ Difficult to soothe ○ Excessive spitting-up, diarrhea ○ Stuffy nose, sneezing ○ Stiff arms and legs, jerky movements ○ Trouble gaining weight 	<p>Many babies who were exposed to substances before they were born may look healthy but they may have considerable behavioral and developmental difficulties. These problems may affect their daily routines later in life. These issues may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delays reaching developmental milestones (walking, talking, playing) • Hyperactive/trouble focusing • Over-reactive to the sensation of movement • Inability to settle down • Rapid shifts in mood (calm one minute, screaming the next) • Difficulty adapting to change • Sleeping and eating disturbances • Aggression • Impulsivity • Learning difficulties • Poor weight gain

Resources:

Early Childhood Intervention Services(ECI)

<https://hhs.texas.gov/services/disability/early-childhood-intervention-services>

Zero to Three

<https://www.zerotothree.org>

CDC Developmental Milestones

<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/index.html>

Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS)

<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/nas.html>

Healthy Children.org from the American Academy of Pediatrics

<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/nas.html>