

Effects of Drugs on Babies

The American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Drugs has recommended that, during labor, drugs be used that have the least effect on the baby, as determined by neurobehavioral testing (1). The committee recommended that it would be advisable to avoid the use of drugs that produce significant changes in the behavior of the infant. The committee's recommendation concluded that the physician should discuss with the patient the potential benefits and side effects of any drugs used by the mother for the relief of labor pain and their effects on both mother and baby.

In past years, the effects that labor medications had on babies was measured by their incidence of sickness or death. Today, physicians have a greater knowledge of drug transfer from mother to baby via the placenta, and the effects that drugs have on the baby. During her labor, a mother metabolizes much of the drugs used; but, after birth, the baby must do so. Physicians now acknowledge that medications given to a mother in labor will have adverse effects on her baby. Yet, since these ill effects do not continue beyond infancy, the use of drugs in labor is accepted.

Why, in our "just say no" to drugs culture, do women feel that drugs are acceptable for use in labor? We, as parents, would be appalled if our children use recreational drugs, or narcotics. Yet, we give them their first taste of drugs in utero.

Research (2) has found that when mothers in labor receive opiates, barbiturates or nitrous oxide for longer than one hour, within ten hours of their babies' deliveries, their children will be more likely to become addicted to opiates if they take drugs later in life. Drug addiction in adults might stem from imprinting during birth; when the mother receives certain drugs in labor. The

risk of drug abuse in the child increases as the number of doses of pain medication in labor increases. Narcotics are added to the epidural mix to enhance pain relief. The narcotic pain relievers used in labor that cross the placenta and flow into the baby's blood stream should not be used. They can have lasting adverse effects.

While this idea may seem far fetched to some, at least one study shows a direct correlation to babies born under general anesthesia and autism later in life (3). Babies born in one particular hospital (where 95% of births occurred with the use of general anesthesia) to mothers who were medicated with a mix of sedatives, anesthetics and analgesics. showed a higher incidence of disorders. These included 23 cases of autism, 14 developmental disorders and 12 cases of mental retardation. This depression of the central nervous system was believed to be caused by Diazepam, a drug used frequently in labor in the 70's and 80's. The long term effects of labor medications on babies is not adequately addressed.

Do not allow a physician to convince you that medications used in labor are "safe" for your baby. Short term and long term adverse effects of labor medications have been reported for years. Allow your baby a drug-free entrance into the world.