

**Early life exposure to nicotine: Postnatal metabolic, neurobehavioral and metabolic outcomes and the development of childhood cancers**

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**Abstract**

Cigarette smoking during pregnancy is associated with numerous obstetrical, fetal and developmental complications, as well as an increased risk of adverse health consequences in the adult offspring. Nicotine replacement therapy (NRT) and electronic nicotine delivery systems (e-cigarettes) have been developed as a pharmacotherapy for smoking cessation and are considered safer alternatives for women to smoke during pregnancy. The safety of NRT use during pregnancy has been evaluated in a limited number of short-term human trials, but there is currently no information on the long-term effects of developmental nicotine exposure in humans. However, animal studies suggest that nicotine alone may be a key chemical responsible for many of the long-term effects associated with maternal cigarette smoking on the offspring and increases the risk of adverse neurobehavioral outcomes, dysmetabolism, respiratory illness and cancer. This review will examine the long-term effects of fetal and neonatal nicotine exposure on postnatal health.

**Keywords:** nicotine, pregnancy, fetal programming of adult disease, nicotine replacement therapy (NRT), electronic nicotine delivery system (e-cigarettes), dysmetabolism, lung development, neurotoxicity, childhood cancer

## 1. Introduction

There is compelling evidence from multiple epidemiological studies and meta-analyses that cigarette smoking during pregnancy is associated with a number of adverse obstetrical outcomes including: spontaneous pregnancy loss (Pineles et al. 2014), placenta previa (Shobeiri and Jenabi 2017), placental abruption (Shobeiri et al. 2017), preterm birth (Shah and Bracken 2000; Dahlin et al. 2016; Moore et al. 2016), stillbirth (Marufu et al. 2015; Bjørnholt et al. 2016), impaired fetal growth (Blatt et al. 2015; Abraham et al. 2017; Pereira et al. 2017) and sudden infant death syndrome (Zhang and Wang 2013; Anderson et al. 2019). Smoking cessation, or at least a reduction in cigarette smoking during pregnancy can improve many of these outcomes. Indeed, smoking cessation during pregnancy has been shown to reduce the incidence of impaired fetal growth (low birthweight or intrauterine growth restriction), prematurity and stillbirth (Hodyl et al. 2014; Räisänen et al. 2014; Soneji and Beltrán-Sánchez 2019; Veisani et al. 2019).

Although cigarette smoking during pregnancy has been identified as a significant modifiable risk factor for adverse pregnancy outcomes, recent data suggests that many women still smoke during their pregnancies with prevalence rates ranging from 1.7% globally, to as high as 59% in some regions (Cui et al. 2014; Drake et al. 2018; Lange et al. 2018). While approximately 75% of pregnant smokers want to quit, studies indicate that only half of women successfully abstain completely from smoking during pregnancy (Greaves et al. 2011; Tong et al. 2013; Orton et al. 2014; Gilbert et al. 2015). Nicotine dependence is a significant element of most women's smoking behavior and a significant negative predictor of smoking abstinence during pregnancy (Benowitz 2010; Riaz et al. 2016; Baraona et al. 2017). Consequently, nicotine replacement therapy (NRT; *e.g.*, nicotine containing gum, lozenges and transdermal patches) has been widely developed as a pharmacotherapy of smoking cessation (Moerke et al. 2020) and should be considered if the patient is unable to quit smoking by other means (Zwar et al. 2011; Behrakis 2016; Bar-Zeev et al. 2017; Ordean et al. 2017). Recently, electronic nicotine delivery systems (e-cigarettes) have become available and marketed as effective smoking cessation tools (Patel et al. 2016; Ramamurthi et al. 2016; Farsalinos 2018; Collins et al. 2019). Notably, in a recent study of pregnant smokers, the use of e-cigarettes to quit smoking was more common than any other FDA-approved smoking cessation pharmacotherapy (Oncken et al. 2017).

In pregnant women who use NRT or e-cigarettes for smoking cessation, nicotine crosses the placenta, concentrates in fetal blood and amniotic fluid, and is detectable in breast milk during lactation in some cases at higher concentrations than in maternal plasma (Jordanov 1990; Lambers and Clark 1996; Rowe et al. 2015; Napierala et al. 2016). NRT products were previously categorized as Pregnancy Category C (gum, nasal spray and lozenges) or D (transdermal patches) drugs (Bruin et al. 2010). New FDA Pregnancy and Lactational Labeling Rules include additional details about the risks of drugs in pregnancy (Pernia and DeMaagd 2016). In general, NRT product monographs suggest that NRT should only be considered for smoking cessation in pregnancy if the risk to the fetus or mother of continued smoking outweighs any potential adverse effects of NRT exposure (Drugs.com). Guidelines from a number of countries recommend that NRT be offered to pregnant women who are unable to quit smoking using non-pharmacologic means (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence 2010; Zwar et al. 2011; Canadian Action Network for the Advancement, Dissemination and Adoption of Practice-informed Tobacco Treatment

2011; The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists 2017). Although NRT is highly effective for smoking cessation in non-pregnant smokers (Cahill et al. 2013), the evidence is much less clear during pregnancy. A recent Cochrane review of pharmacological interventions for promoting smoking cessation during pregnancy found evidence that in a pooled analysis of 9 studies and 2336 participants, NRT and behavioral support did increase cessation rates relative to control (RR 1.37, 95% CI 1.08-1.74), but when the analysis was limited to placebo-controlled randomized control trials there was no clear benefit of NRT use on cessation rates (RR 1.21, 95% CI 0.95-1.55) (Claire et al. 2020). The lack of a clear benefit of NRT for smoking cessation during pregnancy may be related to the low adherence to NRT among pregnant smokers; in studies where adherence was reported, complete adherence with the treatment protocol occurred in less than 40% of participants (Claire et al. 2020). Despite the lack of evidence to support the efficacy of NRT use during pregnancy, estimates suggest that approximately 10-20% of pregnant women are offered or prescribed NRT for smoking cessation (Dhalwani et al. 2014; Kapaya et al. 2015). Moreover, there has been an increase in e-cigarette usage during pregnancy; Cardenas and colleagues published a small cohort study using self-reports and non-invasive smoking biomarkers in 232 pregnant women and found that 6.8% of pregnant women were e-cigarette users, with most being concurrent smokers (75%) (Cardenas et al. 2019).

### ***1.1 NRT, smokeless tobacco and e-cigarette use in pregnancy: human studies***

As of 2019, there have only been 9 clinical trials which have investigated the efficacy and/or safety of NRT for smoking cessation during pregnancy (Claire et al. 2020); most of these have focused on obstetrical outcomes and the short-term (<2 years) effects on the offspring. There are also a number of observational studies and retrospective cross-sectional studies which have looked at the effects of exposure to smoke-free nicotine containing products including NRT, snus/snuff, smokeless tobacco, Alaskan iq'mik and e-cigarettes (Glover and Phillips 2020). Although Claire et al. (2020) did not find evidence for increased rates of adverse pregnancy or infant outcomes (*e.g.*, miscarriage, stillbirth, low birthweight, preterm birth, neonatal intensive care unit admissions, neonatal death and congenital anomalies) in randomized control trials of NRT use during pregnancy (Claire et al. 2020), there is some, albeit inconsistent, evidence from cohort studies that exposure to smoke-free nicotine products during pregnancy can increase the risk of congenital malformations, stillbirth, preterm birth and low birthweight (Glover and Phillips 2020). Using data from the Swedish Medical Birth Registry (1999-2009), Gunnerbeck et al. (2014) reported an increased risk of oral cleft malformations in infants whose mothers used snuff compared to non-tobacco users (aOR 1.48, 95% CI 1.00-2.21). Similarly, using data from the Danish National Birth Cohort (1997-2003), Morales-Suárez-Varela and colleagues showed an increased prevalence of congenital malformations in pregnant NRT users compared to nonsmokers (Morales-Suárez-Varela et al. 2006). Conversely, analysis of primary care data from the UK (2001-2012) did not find an increased association between maternal NRT exposure and major congenital anomalies compared to the control group (aOR 1.12, 99% CI 0.84-1.48) (Dhalwani et al. 2015). However, Although NRT use was not associated with an increased risk of stillbirth (Strandberg-Larsen et al. 2008), the use of smokeless tobacco, which delivers doses of nicotine similar to cigarette smoking (Benowitz 2011), has been reported to increase rates of stillbirth (Gupta and Subramoney 2006; Suliankatchi and Sinha 2016; Hossain et al. 2018). Moreover, while smoking is

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3 clearly associated with preterm birth and intrauterine growth restriction (Shah and Bracken  
4 2000; Pereira et al. 2017), the role of nicotine in causing this effect is unclear. Randomized  
5 control trials of NRT use in pregnancy have not shown increased rates of either low  
6 birthweight or preterm birth (Claire et al. 2020), yet retrospective studies have reported  
7 associations between nicotine exposure and these outcomes. For example, data from the  
8 2004 Phase V Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System indicated that self-reported  
9 NRT use during pregnancy was associated with an approximate 2-fold increased risk of  
10 low birth weight and preterm birth compared to non-smokers (Gaither et al. 2009).  
11 Similarly, maternal snuff and smokeless tobacco use have also been associated with  
12 preterm birth and low birthweight (Ratsch and Bogossian 2014; Dahlin et al. 2016;  
13 Suliankatchi and Sinha 2016). Finally, relative to pregnant women who did not use nor  
14 were exposed to tobacco or e-cigarettes, e-cigarette-only use during pregnancy increased  
15 the risk of having a small for gestational age infant (RR 5.1, 95% CI 1.2-22.2) (Cardenas  
16 et al. 2019).  
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21 Taken together, evidence from human studies on the safety of NRT use (including e-  
22 cigarettes) during pregnancy remains uncertain (World Health Organization 2013;  
23 Committee on Underserved Women and Committee on Obstetric Practice 2017), yet there  
24 is some consensus that NRT may be a safer alternative to smoking during pregnancy  
25 because the mother and fetus are exposed to one chemical instead of the thousands of  
26 chemicals found in cigarette smoke (Benowitz et al. 2000). Indeed, it has been shown that  
27 conventional NRT use during pregnancy while abstinent from smoking results in lower  
28 maternal nicotine exposure than seen with smoking (Hickson et al. 2019), suggesting that  
29 the fetus will also be exposed to much less nicotine than children born to women who  
30 smoke during pregnancy. The same is not necessarily true for e-cigarette use. In fact, e-  
31 cigarette use has been reported to result in higher or comparable levels of nicotine exposure  
32 when compared to traditional tobacco cigarette use (Jarvis et al. 1984; Etter 2014; St Helen  
33 et al. 2016). While some studies have reported that amongst pregnant women there is a  
34 perception that e-cigarettes are less harmful than traditional cigarettes (Mark et al. 2015;  
35 Breland et al. 2019), e-cigarette use exposes the fetus to other chemicals including  
36 flavorants and thermal degradation products whose toxicity is largely unknown (Ward et  
37 al. 2020).  
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41 There is still considerable concern that there is no safe dose of nicotine during pregnancy  
42 (Bar-Zeev et al. 2017). Indeed, animal studies have demonstrated evidence of adverse  
43 behavioral, developmental, cardiovascular, respiratory, endocrine and metabolic outcomes  
44 in the offspring following maternal nicotine exposure (Bruin et al. 2010; Holbrook 2016;  
45 England et al. 2017). However, the evidence in human studies is less clear as most human  
46 studies of nicotine exposure use during pregnancy generally consider the acute risks of  
47 nicotine exposure on the developing fetus and in some cases, the long-term neurological  
48 effects. Moreover, nicotine exposure as a result of cigarette smoking or e-cigarette use also  
49 exposes the fetus to a multitude of other compounds. Nevertheless, considerable insight  
50 into the long-term effects of developmental nicotine exposure can be gained from animal  
51 models. Therefore, the goal of this review is to assess the current evidence regarding the  
52 long-term effects of fetal and neonatal nicotine exposure in animal and human studies.  
53 Searches were conducted on PubMed to collect relevant papers from 2010 to May 2020  
54 based on the following keywords: “nicotine” “nicotine replacement therapy”, “e-cigarette”,  
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3 “smokeless tobacco”, “snus”, “snuff”, “iq’mik” and “pregnancy” with, “fetal”,  
4 “dysmetabolism”, “obesity” “diabetes” “adiposity”, “cardiovascular” “neurotoxicity”,  
5 “lung development” and “childhood cancer”. Although most papers utilized animal and  
6 cell models, studies that involved human participants were prioritized where possible.  
7 These searches were not intended for the purpose of a systematic review but rather to  
8 evaluate recent findings on the effects of early life exposure to nicotine; as such, relevant  
9 studies prior to 2010 were included as appropriate. We will use these animal studies to  
10 consider the potential contribution of nicotine to the long-term toxicity associated with  
11 cigarette smoke exposure and ENDS use during fetal and neonatal development in human  
12 populations.  
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## 16 **2. Long-term effects of fetal and neonatal exposure to nicotine**

### 17 **2.1 Neurodevelopmental and behavioral outcomes**

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19 Nicotine functions as a neurotransmitter, acting on nicotinic acetylcholine receptors  
20 (nAChR) which are distributed in specific brain regions throughout neurodevelopment  
21 (Dwyer et al. 2009). Nicotine has been clearly established as a neuroteratogen and  
22 numerous animal studies have shown that early life exposure to nicotine results in adverse  
23 neurodevelopmental outcomes including disrupted synaptic plasticity and neuronal  
24 maturation, deficits in the number of neurons, and changes in brain volume (Thomas et al.  
25 2000; Slotkin et al. 2007; Mahar et al. 2012; Muhammad et al. 2012; Zhu et al. 2012; Sailer  
26 et al. 2019; Kazemi et al. 2020). These morphological and functional changes in brain  
27 development have been associated with altered behaviors including, increased risk of  
28 cognitive impairments, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression,  
29 impaired behavioral flexibility, increased anxiety and somatosensory deficits in the  
30 nicotine-exposed offspring (Reviewed in: (Abbott and Winzer-Serhan 2012; Liao et al.  
31 2012; Holbrook 2016; Sailer et al. 2019)). Interestingly, evidence from rodent studies  
32 suggests that many of these outcomes are sex-dependent (Balsevich et al. 2014; Cross et  
33 al. 2017; Zhang et al. 2018). For example, maternal exposure to nicotine resulted in  
34 anxiety-like behaviors in male offspring but not female offspring, whereas ADHD-like  
35 behaviors were reported in both male and female offspring (Polli et al. 2020).  
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40 Adverse effects of nicotine exposure on neurodevelopment have also been reported  
41 following exposure to nicotine in e-cigarette vapors in animal and cell culture models  
42 (Nguyen et al. 2018; Church et al. 2020; Ruszkiewicz et al. 2020). Briefly, *in vitro* and *in*  
43 *vivo* rodent models investigating the influence of prenatal e-cigarette exposure on brain  
44 development suggest that exposure to e-cigarette aerosols increases neuronal death,  
45 reduces neuronal viability, worsens neonatal brain injury and decreases learning and  
46 memory in adolescent offspring with a brain injury (Sifat et al. 2020). Similarly, maternal  
47 e-cigarette exposure in mice has resulted in increased short-term memory deficits, reduced  
48 anxiety and hyperactivity in the offspring (Nguyen et al. 2018). Even though e-cigarette  
49 aerosols contain toxicants other than nicotine (Ward et al. 2020) the similarities in  
50 neurodevelopmental and behavioral outcomes following exposure to nicotine alone or  
51 nicotine as a component of e-cigarette aerosols suggest that exposure to nicotine, regardless  
52 of source, results in deficits in neurodevelopment and behavioral outcomes in rodent  
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3 models and supports the hypothesis that nicotine exposure may explain many of the adverse  
4 neurobehavioral outcomes in children born to women who smoke during pregnancy.  
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7 In humans, *in utero* exposure to cigarette smoke has been associated with adverse  
8 behavioral outcomes including greater irritability, hyperactivity, attention deficits, lower  
9 language comprehension and lower IQ (Reviewed in: (Abbott and Winzer-Serhan 2012;  
10 Liao et al. 2012; Smith et al. 2016)). Of the numerous behavioral disorders that have been  
11 reported in the offspring of women who smoke, the strongest evidence is for an association  
12 between maternal smoking and ADHD in the offspring. A meta-analysis of prospective  
13 cohort studies reported an association between maternal smoking and an increased risk of  
14 ADHD in the offspring (pooled RR 1.58, 95% CI 1.33-1.88) (He et al. 2017). Moreover,  
15 there is evidence that the severity of ADHD symptomology is positively correlated with  
16 the number of cigarettes smoked per day (Willoughby et al. 2009). Importantly, many  
17 rodent models of prenatal nicotine exposure have reported hyperactivity, attention deficit,  
18 working memory deficits, and impulsive-like behaviors in nicotine-exposed offspring (Zhu  
19 et al. 2012; El Marroun et al. 2014; Zhu et al. 2017; Polli et al. 2020).  
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23 While animal models have demonstrated that exposure to nicotine alone can affect  
24 neurodevelopment and offspring behavior, there is little information available in human  
25 populations (Reviewed in: (Sailer et al. 2019)). The single trial of NRT use in pregnancy,  
26 the SNAP trial, evaluated infant outcomes beyond the immediate perinatal period and  
27 reported that at 2 years of age, infants born to mothers who used NRT during pregnancy  
28 did not have an increased risk of impairments across 5 domains: communication, gross  
29 motor skills, fine motor skills, problem solving and personal social development (Cooper  
30 et al. 2014). While these results are reassuring, it is important to note that the compliance  
31 rate in the NRT study arm was below 10% at 1 month (Coleman et al. 2012). Therefore,  
32 the effect of early life exposure to nicotine alone, on neurodevelopment and postnatal  
33 behavior in children still remains largely unknown.  
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## 36 37 **2.2 Metabolic outcomes**

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39 Maternal smoking during pregnancy is consistently linked to an increased risk of obesity  
40 and dysmetabolism (*i.e.*, aberrant glucose and lipid homeostasis) in the offspring. Indeed,  
41 a recent meta-analysis, based on 39 studies of 236,687 children, reported an increased risk  
42 of obesity in children born to mothers who smoked during pregnancy (pooled aOR 1.55,  
43 95% CI 1.40-1.73) (Rayfield and Plugge 2017). Pediatric obesity is associated with  
44 cardiovascular and metabolic comorbidities previously considered to be "adult" diseases  
45 (*i.e.*, type 2 diabetes mellitus (T2DM), hypertension, nonalcoholic fatty liver disease  
46 (NAFLD) and dyslipidemia), lower health-related quality of life indicators and increased  
47 health care utilization and costs (Pelone et al. 2012; Buttitta et al. 2014; Lobstein and  
48 Jackson-Leach 2016). Recent estimates suggest that the health care costs associated with  
49 childhood obesity attributable to maternal smoking are over \$9 billion/year in the US and  
50 \$600 million/year in Canada (Chaiton and Holloway 2016).  
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54 Since it is well-established that maternal cigarette smoking results in intrauterine growth  
55 restriction (Pereira et al. 2017) and that low birthweight is a significant risk factor for the  
56 development of cardiometabolic disease (Erkamp et al. 2019; Fall and Kumaran 2019);  
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3 Nakano 2020), it has been suggested that the association of cigarette smoking with an  
4 increased risk of adverse postnatal health outcomes is simply a reflection of intrauterine  
5 growth restriction. However, maternal smoking increases the risk of adult-onset diseases  
6 in the offspring even after adjustment for a wide range of confounding factors including  
7 birthweight, infancy BMI and socioeconomic status (Weng et al. 2012; Behl et al. 2013;  
8 Morgen et al. 2018; Rogers 2019); suggesting that it may be a direct effect of intrauterine  
9 exposure to the chemicals in cigarette smoke that accounts for the increased risk of adverse  
10 health outcomes in the offspring of women who smoke during pregnancy. Of the thousands  
11 of chemicals in cigarette smoke, animal studies suggest that fetal exposure to nicotine alone  
12 may result in dysmetabolism (*i.e.*, increased weight gain/adiposity, aberrant glucose  
13 homeostasis and cardiovascular disease) in postnatal life.  
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### 16 17 2.2.1 Weight Gain, Adiposity and Dyslipidemia

18 Prenatal nicotine exposure has been shown to result in increased postnatal body weight and  
19 higher levels of body fat in animal models (Behl et al. 2013). The mechanisms by which  
20 early life exposure to nicotine can impact body weight homeostasis in animals are varied  
21 and include increased energy intake, reduced energy expenditure and effects on adipose  
22 tissue development and function. There is evidence that early life exposure to nicotine  
23 increases the hypothalamic expression of neuropeptide Y (NPY), an important orexigenic  
24 neuropeptide (Huang and Winzer-Serhan 2007; Chen et al. 2012; Younes-Rapozo et al.  
25 2013). The effects of nicotine on energy intake are complex as nicotine has been shown to  
26 increase food efficiency and preference for sugar but not overall food intake (Somm et al.  
27 2008; Younes-Rapozo et al. 2013; Pinheiro et al. 2015). Interestingly, a rat model of early  
28 life exposure to cigarette smoke results in hyperphagia and an increased preference for a  
29 high-fat diet (Peixoto et al. 2019); these results are similar to what has been reported in the  
30 Saguenay Youth Study, a population-based cross sectional study investigating the long-  
31 term consequences of prenatal exposure to cigarette smoke (Haghighi et al. 2013; Ken W.  
32 K. Lee et al. 2015). Similarly, children exposed *in utero* to cigarette smoke had  
33 significantly higher *ad libitum* energy intake at a palatable lunch buffet but not over a 7-  
34 day period (Cameron et al. 2018). Taken together, these data suggest that early life  
35 exposure to nicotine in humans may influence body weight homeostasis via changes in  
36 energy intake and food preferences; although the effects of exposure to nicotine in the  
37 absence of the other components of cigarette smoke remains to be determined.  
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42 As obesity is a disorder of energy imbalance between energy intake and energy  
43 expenditure, it is also possible that nicotine exposure in early life increases obesity risk in  
44 the offspring via persistent changes in energy expenditure. Indeed, decreased spontaneous  
45 activity and perturbed thermogenesis was reported in rats exposed prenatally to nicotine  
46 (Somm et al. 2008). Recent work has shown that brown adipose tissue (BAT) is a  
47 thermogenic tissue which regulates energy expenditure (Villarroya et al. 2018). In rats,  
48 perinatal exposure to nicotine has been shown to increase the accumulation of unilocular  
49 lipid droplets in BAT (*i.e.*, whitening of BAT) along with decreased expression of  
50 thermogenesis-specific genes and sympathetic nervous system activity (*i.e.*, reduced BAT  
51 activity) (Fan, Ping, et al. 2016; Peixoto et al. 2019). Neonatal exposure to cigarette smoke  
52 had similar effects (Peixoto et al. 2019). The influence of nicotine exposure on energy  
53 expenditure and/or BAT activity in humans is not well known as there are few studies  
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3 which have investigated these outcomes in the offspring of women who smoke or use  
4 nicotine during pregnancy. To our knowledge, the single study which assessed energy  
5 expenditure in children born to women who smoke did not report any differences in resting  
6 energy expenditure (Cameron et al. 2018); however, there was no assessment of any  
7 markers of BAT activity. Given that reduced energy expenditure is a key component of  
8 obesity that has been shown to be affected by nicotine exposure, studies investigating these  
9 outcomes in children with early life exposure to nicotine are warranted.  
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12 Prenatal nicotine exposure has also been shown to lead to increased storage of lipids in  
13 both white adipose tissue (WAT) and peripheral tissues, an effect which is central to the  
14 development of obesity and insulin resistance (Blüher 2013). Rats exposed *in utero* to  
15 nicotine have elevated expression of adipogenic markers in WAT and increased fat pad  
16 weights (Somm et al. 2008; Behl et al. 2013; Fan, Zhang, et al. 2016). These effects may  
17 be due to direct effects of nicotine on the developing adipocytes as *in vitro* studies have  
18 shown that nicotine exposure can increase lipid accumulation and adipocyte maturation in  
19 mouse 3T3-L1 cells in a dose-dependent manner (Zhang et al. 2020). Similarly, increased  
20 percent body fat and fat mass have also been reported in children born to women who  
21 smoke (Moschonis et al. 2017; Cameron et al. 2018). Nicotine exposure in animal models  
22 has also been reported to increase hepatic fat accumulation (Ma et al. 2014) which is a key  
23 component of NAFLD (Tiniakos et al. 2010). The effect of nicotine on hepatic fat  
24 accumulation may be mediated via epigenetic changes in genes important for lipid  
25 homeostasis (Suter et al. 2010). For example, *in utero* exposure to nicotine causes elevated  
26 hepatic triglyceride levels in association with increased histone H3 [K9,14] acetylation in  
27 the promoter of hepatic fatty acid synthase, a key gene involved in *de novo* lipogenesis, in  
28 nicotine-exposed offspring at 6 months of age (Ma et al. 2014). Importantly, liver fat is  
29 often associated with obesity and insulin resistance (Bellentani 2017). These changes in  
30 insulin sensitivity may explain increased diabetes risk in children born to women who  
31 smoke (Reviewed in (Rogers 2019)). Alternatively, the increased risk of diabetes following  
32 *in utero* exposure to cigarette smoke (Rogers 2019) may be attributed, in part, to nicotine-  
33 induced reductions in beta cell mass as has been reported in animal studies (Reviewed in  
34 (Bruin et al. 2010)).  
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### 40 2.2.2 Hypertension

41 Hypertension is another health consequence associated with *in utero* exposure to cigarette  
42 smoking in humans (Bruin et al. 2010; Cabral et al. 2018; Rogers 2019) and animal studies  
43 suggest that this may be mediated via nicotine exposure. Indeed, fetal and neonatal nicotine  
44 exposure in rodents results in increased blood pressure in adult life (Pausová et al. 2003;  
45 Gao et al. 2008; Xiao et al. 2015). A recent study has reported that children exposed *in*  
46 *utero* to snus, a smokeless tobacco that delivers nicotine but not the combustion products  
47 found in cigarette smoke, had increased blood pressure at 5-6 years of age (Felicia et al.  
48 2019). The mechanisms underlying increased blood pressure following early life exposure  
49 to nicotine are not fully known but may involve abnormalities in heart development and/or  
50 function as has been reported in animal studies (Wang et al. 2015; Barra et al. 2017).  
51 Alternatively, perinatal nicotine exposure may induce vasoconstriction and facilitate the  
52 hypertensive phenotype in adulthood via epigenetic mechanisms (Xiao et al. 2014). Indeed,  
53 one study conducted in rats found that perinatal exposure to nicotine altered epigenetic  
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3 regulation of vascular angiotensin II receptors (ATRs), as evidenced by reduced DNA  
4 methylation at ATR-specific gene promoter regions (Xiao et al. 2014). Other studies  
5 suggest that increased blood pressure following nicotine exposure could be related to  
6 increased fat mass, glucose abnormalities, or elevated circulating triglyceride levels, all of  
7 which have been identified as determinants of childhood hypertension (Liang et al. 2020)  
8 and reported in nicotine-exposed offspring (Bruin et al. 2010; Ma et al. 2014).  
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11 There is clear evidence from animal studies that early life exposure to nicotine can cause  
12 profound cardiometabolic deficits. Although many of these metabolic perturbations are  
13 similar to what has been reported in children born to mothers who smoked during  
14 pregnancy, cigarette smoke contains numerous constituents making it difficult to attribute  
15 these outcomes to nicotine alone. As there are no clinical studies of NRT use in pregnancy  
16 which have reported metabolic outcomes in children, the consequences of early life  
17 exposure to nicotine in humans remains to be determined and is a significant research gap  
18 in the field.  
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### 23 **2.3 Respiratory Outcomes**

#### 24 **2.3.1 Lung Function and Development**

25 The developing lung is sensitive to exogenous compounds such as those found in maternal  
26 tobacco smoke (Dasgupta et al. 2012; Stocks et al. 2013; Gibbs et al. 2016). There are  
27 several epidemiological studies which have reported that perinatal tobacco smoke exposure  
28 increases the risk of upper and lower respiratory tract infections, bronchitis, asthma,  
29 wheezing, pulmonary hypertension and impaired lung function in the offspring (Kalliola  
30 et al. 2013; den Dekker et al. 2015; Spindel and McEvoy 2016). In fact, 2 meta-analyses  
31 have reported that maternal smoking during the prenatal period was associated with an  
32 increased risk of wheezing (Burke et al. 2012) and asthma (Silvestri et al. 2015) in  
33 childhood. Importantly, there is compelling evidence from several animal studies that  
34 suggest that majority of adverse effects associated with perinatal smoke exposure on the  
35 developing lung are mediated by nicotine alone (Reviewed in: (Maritz and Harding 2011;  
36 Spindel and McEvoy 2016; McEvoy and Spindel 2017; Kuniyoshi and Rehan 2019)).  
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41 Perinatal nicotine exposure alters normal lung development leading to reduced lung size  
42 and volume capacity, thickening of the airway walls and pulmonary vessels and reduced  
43 alveolar surface area (Sekhon et al. 1999; Sekhon et al. 2002; Krebs et al. 2010; Petre et al.  
44 2011; Maritz 2013; Lavezzi et al. 2014; England et al. 2017). Collectively, these outcomes  
45 compromise the primary role of the respiratory system to mediate optimal blood-gas  
46 exchange (Wongtrakool et al. 2012; Spindel and McEvoy 2016). *In vitro* and *in vivo* studies  
47 reveal that the effects of nicotine on airway remodeling can be attributed to its activity at  
48 the  $\alpha 7$  nAChR (Reviewed in: (Gibbs et al. 2016; Spindel and McEvoy 2016). Maternal  
49 nicotine exposure upregulates  $\alpha 7$  nAChR expression in fetal lung macrophages and  
50 epithelial cells and fibroblasts (Sekhon et al. 1999; Sekhon et al. 2002; England et al. 2017)  
51 and it has been suggested that nicotine activity at  $\alpha 7$  nAChR may play a role in altering  
52 lung development, morphogenesis and airway plasticity (Sekhon et al. 1999; Maritz and  
53 Harding 2011). In support of this hypothesis, perinatal nicotine exposure did not cause  
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3 impaired lung function (as measured by forced expiratory flows) in  $\alpha 7$  nAChR knockout  
4 mice (Wongtrakool et al. 2012).  
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7 Defects in lung development are often associated with impaired lung function and an  
8 increased incidence of respiratory diseases including asthma and wheeze (Stocks et al.  
9 2013). There is compelling evidence demonstrating that prenatal exposure to nicotine  
10 adversely alters pulmonary function parameters, with consistent reports of decreased  
11 forced expiratory flows. These findings are indicative of alterations to airway diameter and  
12 compliance during critical stages of lung development (Landau 2008; Spindel and McEvoy  
13 2016). Similarly, results from epidemiological studies have reported impaired lung  
14 function and increased risk for wheezing, asthma and hospitalization due to respiratory  
15 complications in children exposed to tobacco smoke (Reviewed in: (McEvoy and Spindel  
16 2017; Wang et al. 2020)). However, the impact of prenatal exposure to tobacco smoke on  
17 asthma risk is complex and cannot be solely attributed to nicotine exposure as evidenced  
18 by the fact that infants with prenatal exposure to paternal tobacco smoke also have an  
19 increased risk of asthma by age 6 (Wu et al. 2019). Despite this, there is some evidence in  
20 humans that early life exposure to nicotine alone can impact lung function in the offspring.  
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24 In a recent cohort study including 192,498 children, a small number of exposed cases  
25 showed that offspring born of women prescribed NRT patches during their first trimester  
26 of pregnancy demonstrated a significant association between maternal NRT use and  
27 respiratory anomalies (OR 4.65, 99% CI 1.76-12.25) (Dhalwani et al. 2015). While in  
28 humans the effects of nicotine exposure via e-cigarette use during pregnancy are unknown,  
29 a recent study that used a mouse whole-body environmental e-cigarette exposure model  
30 found that neonates exposed to aerosols containing nicotine had significant reductions in  
31 alveolar cell proliferation and impaired lung health (McGrath-Morrow et al. 2015). While  
32 it is unclear whether nicotine-containing e-cigarettes will have the same effect in humans,  
33 these findings suggest that the use of e-cigarette during pregnancy may adversely affect  
34 respiratory health of offspring.  
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### 37 38 2.3.2 Fibrosis

39 To date, several epidemiologic studies have reported an association between adult cigarette  
40 smoking and idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis (Taskar and Coultas 2006; Jensen et al. 2012;  
41 Kärkkäinen et al. 2017; Ebrahimpour et al. 2019). There is some evidence that nicotine  
42 may accelerate pathogenesis; *in vitro* and *in vivo* studies have shown that nicotine plays a  
43 role in key pro-fibrotic processes including increased pulmonary fibroblast  
44 transdifferentiation (Krebs et al. 2010; Rehan et al. 2012), activation of collagen-producing  
45 cells (Sekhon et al. 1999; Vicary et al. 2017; Wawryk-Gawda et al. 2018) and recruitment  
46 of inflammatory molecules (Nowak et al. 1990; Roomans et al. 2002). There is limited  
47 evidence demonstrating an association between early life exposure to nicotine and risk for  
48 idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis, however, one epidemiological study has reported an  
49 association between maternal smoking and risk for idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis in the  
50 offspring (OR 1.41, 95% CI 1.19-1.68) (Bellou et al. 2017). Based on animal and cell  
51 culture studies, it is plausible that this association is mediated via nicotine's effects on the  
52 developing lung.  
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3 The substitution of alveolar architecture with collagen and aberrant remodelling of lung  
4 structures are hallmarks of pulmonary fibrosis (Jensen et al. 2012; Pardo and Selman 2016).  
5 Emerging evidence in animal models suggests that fetal and neonatal nicotine exposure  
6 inhibits alveolar development and increases the risk for idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis in  
7 offspring via upregulation of transforming growth factor  $\beta$ 1 signaling (Dasgupta et al.  
8 2012). In fact, in multiple species (rat, mouse and monkey) prenatal nicotine-induced  
9 overexpression of transforming growth factor  $\beta$ 1, and its downstream effectors such as  
10 connective tissue growth factor, has been shown to increase the risk of fibrosis,  
11 inflammation, epithelial-to-mesenchymal transdifferentiation and collagen deposition in  
12 the airways and pulmonary vessels of the offspring (Sekhon et al. 2002; Gauldie et al. 2003;  
13 Tarantal et al. 2010; Dasgupta et al. 2012; Wongtrakool et al. 2012). The nAChRs  
14 expressed on pulmonary fibroblasts and epithelial cells are responsive to exogenous  
15 stimulation by nicotine (Ebrahimpour et al. 2019), suggesting that the observed incidences  
16 of idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis in nicotine-exposed offspring may be attributed to nAChR  
17 signaling. In support of this hypothesis, genetic knock-out models of  $\alpha$ 7-nAChR reversed  
18 the inflammatory response and changes to the local microenvironment of the fibrotic lung  
19 in nicotine-exposed mice (Wongtrakool et al. 2012).  
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24 Interestingly some of these increases in inflammation-related genes appear to be mediated  
25 via epigenetic alterations as a result of early life nicotine exposure. Offspring exposed to  
26 nicotine *in utero* showed decreased HDAC activity and increased overall histone H3  
27 acetylation in the lung (Rehan et al. 2012), paralleling *in vitro* and *in vivo* observations of  
28 cigarette smoke-induced methylation changes in histones H3 [K9] and increased  
29 expression of inflammatory genes, including interleukin-8 and tumor necrosis factor  $\alpha$   
30 (Chen et al. 2015). While further investigation is needed to identify disease-specific genes  
31 altered by nicotine exposure alone, these data suggest that nicotine treatment may alter the  
32 fetal lung epigenome and increase its susceptibility to adult lung diseases, such as asthma  
33 and idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis (Suter et al. 2015).  
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#### 38 **2.4 Childhood Cancers**

39 Prenatal exposure to tobacco smoke has been associated with increased risk of childhood  
40 cancers, including childhood brain tumors, hepatoblastomas, and leukemias/lymphomas as  
41 well as genotoxic effects which may increase the risk of adult cancers (Reviewed in:  
42 (Pattimore 2013; Fucic et al. 2017). The most widely studied of these childhood cancers  
43 is acute lymphoblastic leukemia. Recent work suggests that prenatal maternal smoke  
44 exposure increased leukemogenic somatic deletions found in acute lymphoblastic leukemia  
45 (de Smith et al. 2017). In women who smoke, maternal and neonatal blood samples found  
46 increased/altered signaling pathways related to cancer, including: tumor suppressor p53,  
47 ErbB, hedgehog and WNT signaling, all of which are essential signal transduction  
48 pathways related to cancer pathogenesis (Gu 2014). Likewise, other studies have reported  
49 that the largest cluster of biological pathways in newborns impacted by maternal smoking  
50 were related to cancer (Rotroff et al. 2016). Importantly, altered DNA methylation patterns  
51 associated with these pathways have been found to persist in exposed offspring into  
52 adolescence (Ken W.K. Lee et al. 2015; Rotroff et al. 2016). Taken together, these data  
53 suggest that early life exposure to tobacco smoke mediates genetic and epigenetic changes  
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3 resulting in increased risk of childhood cancers, with potentially long-term effects.  
4 However, tobacco smoke contains many known carcinogens (i.e., polycyclic hydrocarbons  
5 and tobacco-smoke specific nitrosamines derivatives) that may also cross the placenta,  
6 making it difficult to attribute the increased risk of cancer to nicotine alone (Reviewed in:  
7 (Fucic et al. 2017). There are now studies that have shown that nicotine can affect several  
8 pathways mediating cancer as well as chromosomal aberrations and DNA double-strand  
9 breaks important in cancer development (Reviewed in: (Sanner and Grimsrud 2015)).  
10 While this evidence suggests that NRT use during pregnancy has the potential to increase  
11 cancer risk in children, this has not been demonstrated in human clinical trials or cohort  
12 studies.  
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16 The mechanism(s) by which nicotine may affect the development of cancer are not well  
17 known, but it may involve activation of the nAChR. Nicotine activation of nAChR has  
18 been shown to influence signaling pathways involved in survival (mitogenic and anti-  
19 apoptotic), proliferation, epithelial to mesenchymal transition, angiogenesis and  
20 metastasis; promoting a cancer-supporting microenvironment that can aid in the initiation  
21 and progression of many adult tumors and cancers (Reviewed in: (Improgo et al. 2011;  
22 Grando 2014; Mishra et al. 2015; Sanner and Grimsrud 2015; Haussmann and Fariss 2016).  
23 Despite the fact that nicotine can influence many pro-cancer pathways, nicotine is not  
24 presently considered a human carcinogen (International Agency for Research on Cancer  
25 2004). While there are no long-term studies assessing the association between *in utero*  
26 exposure to NRT or e-cigarettes and cancer risk in children, *in vitro* studies and animal  
27 experiments suggest that the long-term effects of early life exposure to nicotine and cancer  
28 risk deserve further attention.  
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### 32 **3. Conclusions**

33 Cigarette smoking during pregnancy continues to be a significant modifiable risk factor for  
34 adverse pregnancy and fetal outcomes. Animal models have indicated that nicotine alone  
35 may be responsible for many of the long-term effects associated with maternal tobacco  
36 exposure including adverse metabolic (Pelone et al. 2012; Buttitta et al. 2014; Lobstein and  
37 Jackson-Leach 2016; Liang et al. 2020), pulmonary (Maritz and Harding 2011; Gibbs et  
38 al. 2016; McEvoy and Spindel 2017; Kuniyoshi and Rehan 2019) and neurobehavioral  
39 outcomes (Abbott and Winzer-Serhan 2012; Clifford et al. 2012; Liao et al. 2012; Tiesler  
40 and Heinrich 2014) and increased cancer risk in offspring (Bruin et al. 2010; England et al.  
41 2017) (Fig.1). However, the contribution of nicotine to these same outcomes in humans  
42 remains unclear.  
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46 While NRT and e-cigarette usage are thought to be harm reduction strategies to reduce  
47 tobacco use during pregnancy, the postnatal health consequences of exposure to these  
48 products in humans a limited. There are few trials investigating NRT use during pregnancy  
49 most of which do not explore the postnatal health outcomes in the exposed children. Until  
50 there are carefully designed cohort studies to investigate long-term health outcomes in  
51 children exposed to NRT in fetal and neonatal life, there can be no definitive answer to  
52 whether or not there is a safe dose of nicotine during pregnancy (Bar-Zeev et al. 2017,  
53 Glover and Phillips, 2020). The long term effects of maternal e-cigarette use on offspring  
54 health and the contribution of nicotine to any of these outcomes also remains largely  
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3 unknown. There is evidence that pregnant women are using e-cigarettes for smoking  
4 cessation (Breland et al., 2019, Oncken et al., 2017) which can result in fetal exposure to  
5 nicotine alongside other toxicants. Studies have shown that other components of e-cigarette  
6 liquids (base components and flavoring compounds) can affect nicotine yield and may  
7 themselves have the ability to independently affect key pathways important for fetal  
8 development (DeVito and Krishnan-Sarin 2018; Greene and Pisano 2019). Moreover, e-  
9 cigarette liquids do not contain consistent nicotine concentrations, and the nicotine yield  
10 depends on puffing topography, the type of device used, and the other constituents present  
11 in the e-cigarette liquids. Therefore, there will be considerable challenges to understand  
12 the contribution of nicotine alone to any long-term health outcomes in offspring exposed  
13 to e-cigarette aerosols. Given that there is considerable potential for women to use nicotine  
14 alone during pregnancy through NRT or e-cigarette use, carefully designed human cohort  
15 studies and animal experiments to investigate long-term outcomes in the offspring are  
16 urgently needed.  
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28 **Figure 1:** Summary, from animal studies, of the effects of prenatal nicotine exposure on  
29 the brain, heart, lungs, metabolic-regulating tissues and cancer  
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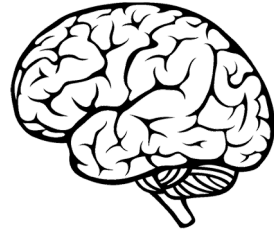
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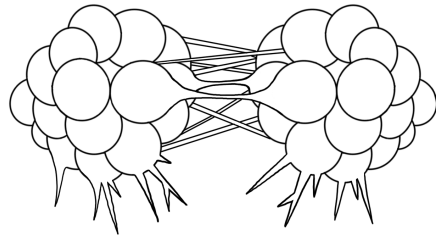
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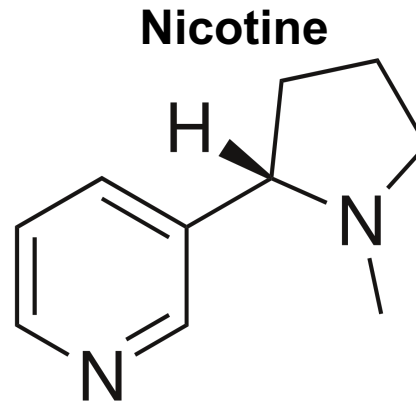
### Neurodevelopment and Behavior

- Disrupted neurodevelopment and synaptic plasticity, ↓ neuronal viability, changes in brain volume
- ↑ risk of cognitive impairments, ADHD, depression, anxiety and somatosensory deficits in offspring
- Adverse neurobehavioral phenotypes and outcomes may persist into adulthood



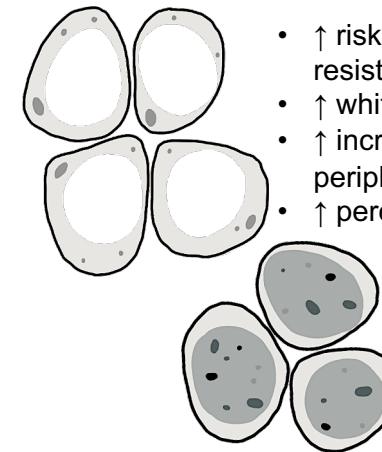
### Childhood Cancer

- ↑ risk of childhood cancer (mediated by genetic and epigenetic changes)
- ↑ chromosomal aberration and DNA double-strand breaks
- ↑ signal transduction pathways related to cancer pathogenesis (i.e. p53, ErbB, hedgehog, WNT)



### Hypertension

- ↑ blood pressure in adult life
- May induce vasoconstriction and facilitate hypertensive phenotype in adulthood via epigenetic mechanisms
- May be related to ↑ fat mass, glucose abnormalities or ↑ circulating triglyceride levels



### Adipose and Growth

- ↑ risk of obesity, dysmetabolism and insulin resistance
- ↑ whitening of BAT and ↓ BAT activity
- ↑ increased storage of lipids in WAT and peripheral tissues
- ↑ percent body fat and fat mass in offspring



### Lung and Fibrosis

- ↓ lung size and volume capacity; thickening of airway walls and pulmonary vessels
- ↓ alveolar surface area
- ↑ TGFβ1 may inhibit alveolar development and ↑ risk of idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis

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