



Royal College  
of Midwives

## Position Statement

Support to quit

# smoking

in pregnancy



# The Royal College of Midwives position

- ▶ Quitting smoking is one of the best things a woman and the people she lives with can do to protect their baby's health through pregnancy and beyond. Pregnancy is a window of opportunity for significant health improvement.
- ▶ All four UK nations currently have clear policies to reduce smoking in pregnancy and their ambitions can be achieved with adequate resources and political will.<sup>1,2,3,4,5,6</sup>
- ▶ All midwives and maternity support workers (MSWs) should be confident and competent in discussing smoking in pregnancy, using techniques such as those contained in the very brief advice (VBA) for pregnant women training, delivered through the RCM's i-learn platform.<sup>7</sup>
- ▶ As part of the NHS Long Term Plan commitments on treating tobacco, maternity-led stop smoking support should be available for pregnant women in all NHS Trusts and Boards. This support should be closely aligned to local community Stop Smoking Services. Funding for this support must be consistent and sustainable. Given that smoking is a marker of inequality, resourcing arrangements should reflect local need.
- ▶ Specialist stop smoking support should be offered in pregnancy on an 'opt out' basis. Smokers are up to four times as likely to quit successfully using help from a trained practitioner, compared to doing it alone.<sup>8</sup>



- ▶ Nicotine Replacement Therapy is safe in pregnancy and should be provided in line with evidence-based protocols to women and their partners, to maximise its use as a quitting aid.<sup>9</sup>
- ▶ E-cigarettes contain some toxins, but at far lower levels than found in tobacco smoke. If a pregnant woman and birthing person who has been smoking chooses to use an e-cigarette (vaping) and it helps her to quit smoking and stay smokefree, she should be supported to do so.
- ▶ If a woman has switched completely to vaping and is not smoking at all, she should be recorded as a non-smoker.
- ▶ Based on the available evidence on e-cigarette safety, there is no reason to believe that use of an e-cigarette has any adverse effect on breastfeeding. Vaping should continue if it is helpful to quitting smoking and staying smokefree.



- ▶ NICE guidance recommends the use of financial incentive schemes to support pregnant smokers to quit. Many local schemes already exist, and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) will be offering Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) and maternity services to opportunity to join a national scheme in 2024.
- ▶ NHS staff who smoke should have access to stop smoking support and be given time off to attend appointments where necessary and appropriate.
- ▶ NHS Trusts and Boards must effectively maintain their premises as smokefree sites.

**Smokers are up to four times as likely to quit successfully using help from a trained practitioner, compared to doing it alone.**




# Background

## Rates of smoking throughout pregnancy, latest national figures.

- ▶ There has been progress over recent years in reducing rates of smoking during pregnancy, but more remains to be done. 11% and 12% of pregnant Northern Irish and Welsh smokers respectively continue to smoke throughout their pregnancy, and 8.8% of women in England were recorded as smoking at the time of delivery in 2022/23.<sup>10</sup>
- ▶ There is significant variation in maternal smoking rates, depending on age, ethnicity and socio-economic status. Rates of smoking in pregnancy in the most deprived areas of England are six times those in the least deprived areas (20% and 3% respectively).<sup>11</sup>
- ▶ According to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD), 29.8% of pregnant women in the most deprived quintile are smokers at booking, compared to 6% in the least deprived SIMD quintile.<sup>12</sup>
- ▶ National initiatives to reduce smoking in pregnancy will therefore help to address socioeconomic inequalities in health outcomes.

## Health effects of smoking

- ▶ Babies born to smoking mothers who quit in early pregnancy have rates of stillbirth, prematurity, low birth weight and small for gestational age the same as or close to those of non-smokers.
- ▶ Evidence shows that stopping smoking early in pregnancy can almost entirely prevent adverse effects.<sup>13</sup>
- ▶ Smoking significantly increases the risk of miscarriage, stillbirth, sudden infant death and birth abnormalities. Smoking also damages a mother's health and is associated with maternal risks in pregnancy, such as placental abruption and eclampsia.



**Evidence shows that stopping smoking early in pregnancy can almost entirely prevent adverse effects.**



## Stop smoking methods and aids

- ▶ A carbon monoxide (CO) breath test is offered by midwives to all women at maternity booking and at subsequent appointments, in line with NICE guidance.<sup>14</sup> Monitors need to be supplied in sufficient numbers to staff and properly maintained.
- ▶ Behavioural support for stopping smoking has been shown to help pregnant women quit.<sup>15</sup> The RCM is aware that innovative support programmes are achieving good outcomes and that intensive, tailored support requires long term investment. The NHS Long Term Plan has committed funding to develop a new tobacco treatment pathway for pregnant smokers, to be implemented by March 2024.
- ▶ Nicotine Replacement Therapy (NRT) is an effective stop smoking aid and is licensed for use in pregnancy. Whilst studies have not been able to demonstrate its effectiveness in isolation, primarily due to problems with compliance, it is widely recommended in conjunction with behavioural support to help women quit and stay smokefree. The RCM calls for more dedicated research into its effectiveness and safety to build the evidence.
- ▶ E-cigarettes or vaping are used with increasing frequency by smokers wishing to limit or stop smoking. Recent studies have shown that they are helpful for cessation and there is significantly reduced exposure to harmful toxins if an individual switches completely.<sup>16</sup>
- ▶ Pregnant women metabolise nicotine faster than other smokers and may need higher nicotine doses delivered at a faster rate than standard NRT formulations.<sup>17</sup>
- ▶ Although nicotine from vaping crosses the placenta, e-cigarettes do not contain many of the toxic ingredients found in cigarette smoke, or at significantly lower levels. While nicotine is the addictive component within cigarettes, it carries minimal risk of harm to health relative to smoked tobacco.<sup>18</sup>
- ▶ E-cigarettes are not completely risk free; the Royal College of Physicians has estimated that e-cigarettes are likely to carry at most 5% of the risk of smoked tobacco.<sup>19</sup> They are not harmless, as the vapour they produce contains some toxins, but studies have shown that these are at levels far lower than those found in tobacco smoke.
- ▶ The RCM would strongly support more testing of the safety and efficacy of e-cigarettes as a stop smoking treatment for pregnant women. The most recent randomised control trial into vaping vs. NRT for smoking cessation in pregnancy showed higher long term quit rates in the vaping cohort (6.8% vs. 3.6%). The study also showed no increase in adverse effects amongst those vaping, and that low birthweight was less common in the vaping cohort compared to those using NRT (10% vs. 15%).



- ▶ Strong evidence now shows that financial incentive schemes are effective in supporting pregnant smokers to quit, by encouraging continued engagement with stop smoking support. Such schemes are recommended by NICE. The DHSC is planning to introduce a national incentive scheme for pregnant smokers in 2024, which maternity units can sign up to. This will also look at ways to bring partners and significant others into the scheme.<sup>20</sup>

## A smokefree NHS

- ▶ NHS staff that smoke are more likely to have sickness absence which can significantly impact on delivery of care and workforce planning.<sup>21</sup>
- ▶ Initiatives to support staff to quit smoking are aligned with the Boorman recommendation that the NHS must be an exemplar employer, taking responsibility for staff wellbeing and reducing sickness.<sup>22</sup>
- ▶ As a trade union that represents over 47,000 health professionals and staff, the RCM would like to see a more caring, proactive and strategic approach by all employers to workforce health and wellbeing. Integrating stop smoking therapeutic services into the workplace, allowing staff time to attend appointments, in work time if necessary, together with maintaining smokefree NHS sites will demonstrate real commitment to health promotion.



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