

Widespread use of medications among pregnant women reported

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Researchers from Boston University's Slone Epidemiology Center, in collaboration with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Harvard School of Public Health, have reported widespread and increasing medication use among pregnant women. The study, which currently appears online in the *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology*, also found that medication use varied by socioeconomic status, maternal age, race/ethnicity and state of residence.

Although a number of antenatal medication exposures are known to cause [birth defects](#), there is insufficient information on the risks and safety for the vast majority of medications, whether they are obtained by prescription or over-the-counter (OTC). As a result, [pregnant women](#) may unknowingly take a medication that poses risk to their fetus; on the other hand, anxiety about the potential harmful effects to the fetus may discourage women from adhering to beneficial treatments.

The findings came from data collected by the Slone Epidemiology Center's Birth Defects Study (1976-2008) and the CDC's National Birth Defects Prevention Study (1997-2003), which together interviewed more than 30,000 women about their medication use during pregnancy. The results included information not only on use of prescription drugs but also OTC medications, which are more commonly used and are not typically recorded in electronic [medical](#)/insurance records.

The following is an outline of the study's findings:

1. During the first trimester of pregnancy

- 70-80 percent of women reported taking at least one medication; and
- By 2008, about 50 percent of women reported taking at least one prescription medication.

2. Over the last 30 years

- First trimester use of prescription medications increased by more than 60 percent;
- Use of 4 or more medications during the first trimester tripled; and
- Antidepressant use during the first trimester increased dramatically.

3. In addition, this study reported that

- Medication use increased with a woman's age and education level;
- Use was higher among non-Hispanic white women compared with women of other races or ethnicities that were studied; and
- Use during pregnancy varied by state of residence.

According to the researchers, defining research priorities requires an understanding of patterns and factors associated with actual use of the wide range of specific medications that are taken during pregnancy and

particularly during the first trimester, when concerns about development of birth defects are greatest. "These data identify prescription medications that are currently most commonly used and therefore urgently require research on their risks and safety; they also reinforce the need for ongoing surveillance regarding medication use in pregnancy and its consequences," said lead author Allen A. Mitchell, MD, director of BU's Slone Epidemiology Center. "Not only is it critical to identify how many OTC and [prescription medications](#) are taken by pregnant women and what those specific medications are, but it is also important to know how use of medications changes over time," he added.

Provided by Boston University Medical Center

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