

Science-focused messaging could help reduce cannabis use during pregnancy

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Short science-backed messages about the health risks of using cannabis while pregnant could be an effective way to discourage the dangerous trend.

In a new study published in *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, researchers at Washington State University found that conveying simple, scientific facts about how THC can harm a fetus was associated with reduced intentions to use [cannabis](#) while pregnant. This held true for [messaging](#) that was written to a group of women, aged 18-40, in either a narrative, story-based format or a non-narrative, factual-based one.

Additionally, the researchers found that short and simple communications designed to increase media literacy, or the ability to discern factual sources of information from non-factual ones, also reduced intentions to use cannabis while pregnant.

As cannabis use continues to gain popularity across the country, the research could help provide effective guidelines on how to communicate to pregnant people about the adverse consequences of using the drug.

"While some messaging around the risks of using cannabis while pregnant exist, as far as we know, there hasn't been a systematic evaluation of those messages or tests for what types of messages can be most effective," said Jessica Willoughby, lead author of the study and an associate professor of communication at WSU. "This is becoming a big issue as cannabis use continues to gain popularity and there is an ever-increasing amount of misinformation out there about the drug."

Cannabis use during pregnancy has been largely understudied, but existing research suggests there are detrimental effects in newborns such as lower birth weight, higher rates of admission to neonatal intensive care units and an increased risk of stillbirth.

Despite this, a startling 70% of pregnant and non-pregnant women believe there is slight to no risk of harm from using cannabis once or twice a week while pregnant, according to a 2015 study.

Prior research conducted by study co-author and Professor Celestina Barbosa-Leiker of the WSU College of Nursing reveals that many of these women are getting their information about the [health risks](#) of using cannabis while pregnant from budtenders and other non-expert sources.

In this work, she asked pregnant and postpartum women about their experiences using cannabis for health-related reasons and they noted that their [healthcare providers](#) often lacked knowledge on the impacts of their cannabis use on their baby or gave mixed messages on possible consequences of cannabis use.

For the current study, the WSU researchers designed scientific and media literacy messaging in narrative and non-narrative formats. The narrative formats took bits of information from people's real-life stories to craft messaging that would resonate with the intended audience. The non-narrative messaging simply conveyed facts, such as THC, the substance that makes you feel high, can also cross the placenta and reach your baby. Giving up marijuana while pregnant can keep THC away from your developing baby.

"We had to be so thoughtful in order not to stigmatize the use of cannabis or particular populations that use cannabis when we were designing the messaging for this study," said Stacey Hust, study co-author and a WSU professor of communication. "We even surveyed pregnant people on variables, such as the color scheme and whether or not to include the faces of people we were displaying."

The researchers then surveyed some 429 women about how the different forms of messaging impacted their decisions to use cannabis. The results of the analysis indicated that straight-forward, non-narrative messages that focused on scientific facts about cannabis use during pregnancy were the most effective solution. While the narrative messages were also effective in the science communication category, the researchers did not

find them effective when trying to educate people about media literacy.

"The ambiguity of the more complex messaging may overly complicate things and make it less effective, especially on social media," Willoughby said. "In fact, our results indicate short Instagram stories can be used to convey factual information but may not provide enough space to discuss complex storylines."

Moving forward, Willoughby, Hust and Barbosa-Leiker said their hope is that the research will ultimately be used to communicate facts about [cannabis use](#) during pregnancy in doctor's offices, cannabis shops and schools.

"I think we could target medical providers, bud tenders and cannabis stores with this type of messaging to help reach people," Hust said. "But to be honest, I think this information needs to be provided way before someone can legally use cannabis. We should probably be talking to [young women](#) in [high school](#) when we are talking to them about reproductive issues and how babies are made."

More information: Jessica Fitts Willoughby et al, Examining science and media literacy health communication messages to reduce intentions to use cannabis while pregnant., *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors* (2023). [DOI: 10.1037/adb0000923](https://doi.org/10.1037/adb0000923)

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