

Don't punish pregnant women for opioid use, docs say

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(HealthDay)—Prevention and treatment, not legal action, should be the focus when dealing with pregnant women who use opioids, a leading pediatricians' group says.

Some states prosecute and jail [pregnant women](#) for substance abuse, but the new statement from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) warns that punitive measures have no [health benefits](#) for mother or child and may deter women from seeking help.

"Over the last two decades, use of opioids surged throughout the U.S., and as they did, we have seen an increase in opioid-related complications in nearly every population, including pregnant women and their infants," statement co-author Dr. Stephen Patrick said in an AAP news release.

"Our response should be grounded in public health. We should be bolstering efforts targeted at primary prevention, like prescription drug-monitoring programs, and expanding treatment tailored to the specific needs of pregnant women and their families," he added.

Along with improving access to birth control, prenatal care and [substance abuse](#) treatment, the AAP recommends:

- Routine alcohol and drug screening for all women of childbearing age,
- Providing information and obtaining informed consent for drug testing and reporting,
- Better access to comprehensive obstetric care, including opioid-replacement therapy,
- Drug and alcohol treatment programs designed for pregnant women,
- More money for social services and child welfare systems.

The statement appears online Feb. 20 and in the March issue of the journal *Pediatrics*.

"Pregnant women must be able to discuss their substance use openly with their medical providers without fear of punishment," statement co-author Dr. Davida Schiff said in the news release.

"Punitive policies towards pregnant women with substance use disorder are detrimental to the health of mother and baby."

The rate of U.S. newborns with symptoms of drug withdrawal surged nearly fivefold over the last decade, according to the academy. In 2012, an infant with withdrawal symptoms was born every 25 minutes in the United States, the group said.

More information: The March of Dimes has more on [opioid use during pregnancy](#).

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