

TAGS: Special Needs; Prenatal Exposure

Does Prenatal Exposure Increase the Risk of Addiction?

Pre-adoptive parents are sometimes presented with an adoption match where the baby has been exposed during pregnancy to alcohol or drugs. Understandably, they are concerned with how these prenatal exposures will affect the child now and in the future. They also worry about whether their child will be at increased risk of addiction later in life.

Is Addiction Genetic?

The National Institute on Drug Abuse reports that "studies that include identical twins, fraternal twins, adoptees, and siblings suggest that as much as half of a person's risk of becoming addicted to nicotine, alcohol, or other drugs depends on his or her genetic makeup."¹ To the extent that a child's birth parents are or were addicts, the child is at an increased genetic risk.

Does Prenatal Drug or Alcohol Exposure Increase the Risk of Addiction?

The answer to whether prenatal exposure to alcohol or drugs during pregnancy makes it more likely that the child will become addicted to these substances later in life is hard to answer because most of the research on these adolescents and young adults has been done on children that were not removed from the home, and thus were raised by parents who likely continued to use drugs or abuse alcohol. Research on the topic that has been reported on various [Creating a Family](#) shows indicates that prenatal exposure to drugs and alcohol stresses the fetus and impacts brain development.

In one such interview with Dr. Ira Chasnoff, president of NTI Upstream and a Professor of Clinical Pediatrics at the University of Illinois College of Medicine in Chicago, said "We don't think that in and of itself being exposed to drugs or alcohol raises the risk of later addiction, but the brain damage caused by fetal exposure does increase the risk. For example, 70% of children exposed to alcohol or drugs during pregnancy will meet the criteria for ADHD (a different kind of ADHD therefore it responds differently to medication). Children with ADHD, as well as other conditions caused by fetal exposure, may lead a teen or young adult to self-medicate. Alcohol or drugs make them feel better."²

What Can Parents Do to Protect Their Child from Later Addiction?

All parents want to protect their kids from drug abuse regardless if they are at average risk or greater risk for drug addiction through either genes or prenatal exposure. In today's culture, many families have some history of alcoholism or drug addiction somewhere in their family tree. It's wise to be aware of the risks and how to prevent future use or abuse.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse has a [booklet of researched based suggestions](#) on how to prevent drug abuse amongst tweens and teens. We offer these three additional suggestions we believe will give your family opportunities to improve communication about the issues of abuse, build strong

¹ From National Institute on Drug Abuse, Genetics and Epigenetics of Addiction, Revised February 2016, <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/genetics-epigenetics-addiction>

² From Creating a Family radio show with Dr. Ira Chasnoff, "Prenatal Alcohol and Drug Exposure: Interview with Dr. Ira Chasnoff" on May 21, 2014, <https://creatingafamily.org/adoption-category/prenatal-alcohol-drug-exposure-interview-dr-ira-chasnoff/>

connections and bolster the other preventions listed in the linked resource:

1. Specifically talk with your kids about their increased risk of addiction due to family history or prenatal exposure.
2. Treat underlying conditions such as ADHD, learning disabilities, etc. so that your teen is less likely to need to self-medicate through alcohol or drugs.
3. Do something each week together as a family that you and your child enjoy. This may not be scientific, but families that play together or have a shared interest also usually have stronger, healthier connections. Kids with healthy parental relationships are less likely to get involved with drugs or abuse alcohol. You'll get better buy-in to the time together if you let the teen lead the way on selecting the family activity.

If you are thinking of adopting a child that has been exposed prenatally, this interview from [Creating a Family with Dr. Ira Chasnoff](#) is a very informative resource. If you are already parenting a child whom you suspect or know has had prenatal exposure to drugs or alcohol, check out this [webinar offered by our partners at NACAC](#).