

Helping heroin users have healthier babies

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A safer treatment for pregnant heroin-dependent women has been investigated by researchers from the University of Western Australia.

The medication naltrexone was found to reduce the risks associated with [heroin](#) use during pregnancy. Naltrexone fights the effects of opioid

drugs such as heroin, preventing the 'high' or euphoria they bring on.

"Methadone is currently the most common treatment for pregnant heroin-dependent women," says Dr. Erin Kelty, who led the research.

"While it can help stabilise some women as they make life changes to move away from heroin, methadone can be associated with some of the same problems as heroin—such as [withdrawal symptoms](#) in the child following birth.

"Naltrexone has the potential to improve the health of children born to heroin-dependent women, with one in every 200 births in Australia being to a mother who has used heroin or another [opioid drug](#) during pregnancy," Erin says.

The use of heroin and other opioids during pregnancy can cause serious harm to the developing fetus, including miscarriage, stillbirth, [low birth weight](#) and withdrawal symptoms following birth.

In the study, treatment with naltrexone was shown to improve birth weight, reduce infant withdrawal, and shorten the length of hospital stay following birth compared with methadone. Unlike methadone treated babies, there was no increase in [birth](#) defects or death during the first month of life.

The research was published in the journal *Drugs*.

More information: Erin Kelty et al. A Retrospective Cohort Study of Birth Outcomes in Neonates Exposed to Naltrexone in Utero: A Comparison with Methadone-, Buprenorphine- and Non-opioid-Exposed Neonates, *Drugs* (2017). [DOI: 10.1007/s40265-017-0763-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s40265-017-0763-8)

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