

In my career as a physician, I have many rewards. My work is challenging and satisfying. I have the honor of helping parents bring new babies into the world, and I have the duty of helping people die gracefully. I try to focus on the positive aspects of my work, but occasionally, I see patterns that trouble me. One such pattern is an increasing tendency for people to make lifestyle choices that can negatively affect their growth and development. That alone is troublesome enough, but lifestyle choices can also impact embryos. I am using this log to discuss my thoughts on lifestyle choices and to discuss ways to solve these problems.

Smoking cigarettes is perhaps the most serious issue I've encountered in my work. True, anti-smoking campaigns have reduced the numbers of new smokers. But once people start smoking, the addiction to nicotine makes it really difficult to quit. Smoking can shorten a person's lifespan and cause different types of cancer. Many of my patients who smoke realize these facts, yet they still can't quit. Many of them started smoking when they were teenagers and didn't realize the consequences of developing such an addiction.

I am especially concerned for my pregnant female patients who smoke. Smoking while pregnant is very serious, and can cause many health and development problems for babies, who may be born prematurely and with a reduced birth weight. Women who smoke have a greater risk of miscarriage, or losing the baby before it is born. Additionally, babies born to women who smoke have a greater risk of birth defects.

Smoking isn't the only lifestyle choice that concerns me. Alcohol and drug use is another choice people make that can have negative effects on their health and development. Like smoking, drugs and alcohol can be dangerously addictive. Many people who wish to quit simply cannot. Abusing drugs and alcohol can shorten one's life and cause serious illnesses, including cancer and hepatitis. In addition to health problems, I have seen many families ripped apart by alcohol or substance addiction.

Like cigarettes, drugs and alcohol are especially harmful when



Smoking can be especially harmful for pregnant women.

abused by pregnant women. One of the worst things I encounter in my practice is *fetal alcohol syndrome*. This problem can cause children to be born underweight and experience growth and development problems throughout their lives, including learning difficulties and speech and memory problems. Imagine having problems you'll have to deal with for the rest of your life created before you're even born!

One other negative lifestyle choice I see is poor diet. I've had patients claim that fast food is cheaper and easier to obtain than healthy vegetables. Whether that's true or not, a fast food diet is usually too high in fat and calories to be nutritious. In my opinion, people aren't eating enough fruits and vegetables. A sensible diet, full of lean proteins and fresh fruits and vegetables, contains everything our bodies need to stay healthy. An unhealthy diet leads to obesity, which is becoming a serious epidemic in our country. Children who are overweight tend to become overweight adults. Obesity can cause diabetes, heart attack, high blood pressure, and other problems. It's also a major medical expense for our entire country.

What troubles me the most is that these problems are completely preventable. I don't know what I can do to stop these problems—I'm only one physician. I do my best to lead a healthy life, full of exercise and nutritious food. I suggest alternative choices to my patients whenever possible, and I counsel them on the risks of their choices. I think the federal government has some good programs designed to increase awareness of these health issues, and I hope that we'll soon witness a decline in some problems. Already, fewer teens smoke than they did just a few decades ago.

I believe education is key to keeping people healthy. Many people simply don't realize that the choices they're making may affect them for the rest of their lives. Pregnant women sometimes don't understand that they're putting their embryos at risk of a lifetime of development issues. My job as a physician helps me educate people, and I will continue to do so with the hope that I may make some small change in the world.



A fast food diet can lead to obesity.