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Healis acknowledges UN resolution on pregnant women exposure to secondhand smoke

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Healis - Sekhsaria Institute for Public Health, an anti-tobacco advocacy group, has positively received the recent United Nations resolution calling upon member States to protect pregnant women and children from exposure to environmental tobacco smoke stating that such an exposure causes permanent genetic damage in newborns that is very similar to the damage caused by active smoking.

Smoking during pregnancy causes a number of problems, including preterm delivery, low birth weight and sudden infant death syndrome. Second hand smoke causes lung cancer and heart disease in adults, and can lead to serious illnesses, such as bronchitis and pneumonia in infants and children. Tobacco smoke inhalation whether direct or indirect may affect the amount of oxygen reaching the unborn child, because haemoglobin is poorly oxygenated.

According to Dr P C Gupta, director, Healis - Sekhsaria Institute for Public Health, the pregnant women are a priority population for tobacco prevention efforts because tobacco use poses serious risks to fetal and maternal health.

Quoting a survey conducted by Healis - Sekhsaria Institute among 1,217 non-smoking pregnant women in their 3-7 month period of pregnancy in lower and middle-class of Mumbai, the research showed 28 per cent of non-smoking pregnant women lived with smokers and were exposed to environmental tobacco smoke.

The survey revealed that pregnant women living with smokers in their household had a significantly higher risk of stillbirth, independent of differences in socio-demographic characteristics and antenatal care. Rates of low birth weight and preterm birth were not significantly different between exposed and non-exposed. Hazard ratio for stillbirth in SHS exposed women (n = 261) was 2.2 (95% confidence interval 1.1-4.4).

Furthermore, the survey found that smokeless tobacco use during pregnancy is associated with lower haemoglobin levels, as has often been observed with cigarette smoking. Dr P C Gupta urged the public health officials to take immediate steps to prevent and reduce tobacco use and secondhand smoke exposure among pregnant women.

The six year-old Healis - Sekhsaria Institute for Public Health is dedicated to improving public health in India and other developing countries. conducts research specific to assess the health situation. It has also played a role in the development of health related issues and works in collaboration with leading national and international health and research organizations.