

PRESS RELEASE

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The Age, September 1st, 2003

Risks greater if you start life in a small way

Smoking does greater damage to adults who are born tiny than to those born at a normal weight, a study has found.

A Royal Women's Hospital study of 44 young adults who were premature and weighed less than 1000 grams at birth found that the breathing ability of those who smoked was deteriorating more rapidly than it would if they had been of normal birth weight.

The 44 were born between 1997 and 1980 and were assessed when they were about 20 years of age. About one-third of them were smokers.

Professor of neo-natal paediatrics Lex Doyle said the people in the study who were born tiny needed help breathing in their early days, either with a ventilator or oxygen. Premature babies, he said, "need to be helped with breathing, partly because they can't start to breathe at birth".

The key was in the lining substance of the lungs called surfactant, which helped the lungs to stay inflated, Professor Doyle said. Without it, they would collapse. Premature babies were often born before their bodies had begun to make surfactant. But both ventilation and oxygen can damage the lungs of babies, which was likely to be the reason behind their higher susceptibility to damage from cigarette smoke later in their lives, he said.

"It seems these young adults who were pre-term, if they now start to smoke, their lung function is deteriorating more rapidly than it should", he said.

The study's findings have been published in the latest edition of the American medical journal Pediatrics.

Professor Doyle said that if the smokers in the group were to quit, they would recover some of their breathing ability, as treatment with anti-asthma medication appeared to improve their condition. "But if they continue to smoke it will become irreversible," he said, although he believed a larger study was needed to confirm this.

While he stressed that most premature babies were healthy, studies had shown them also to be at higher risk of damage from passive smoking and problems with sight, hearing and thinking ability. Babies weighing less than one kilogram number about four in 1000 births. The average birth weight is about 3 ½ kilograms.

The Royal Children's Hospital's director of adolescent health, Susan Sawyer, said the study emphasised the importance of discouraging people from smoking, particularly those with chronic lung disease or born prematurely. Premature babies were more susceptible to acute respiratory infections in the first year of life, she said. As adolescents, some continued to show reduced lung capacity.

