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News Release

Issued: Monday 12 November 2018

High availability of tobacco raises smoking rates in mothers-to-be

Women are more likely to smoke during pregnancy if they live in areas with lots of shops selling cigarettes, a study shows.

Pregnant women living in Scottish neighbourhoods with the highest availability of tobacco products are 70 per cent more likely to smoke than if they live in areas where no tobacco is sold, researchers say.

The study by researchers at the University of Edinburgh is the first to reveal the links between availability of tobacco and smoking during pregnancy.

The team examined maternity records – which include details of expectant mothers’ smoking behaviour – for the more than 700,000 births in Scotland between 2000 and 2015. They focused on women who had at least two babies during the period and moved neighbourhood between pregnancies.

The data was analysed in tandem with information on all the tobacco outlets in Scotland.

Researchers found that the risk of women smoking during a pregnancy increased in line with the local availability of tobacco products.

Limiting the supply of tobacco could help to cut rates of smoking among pregnant women – 15 per cent of whom smoke – and throughout the wider population in Scotland, the team says. The Scottish Government has set a target of reducing smoking rates in the adult population to below five per cent by 2034. The current rate of 21 per cent has not fallen since 2013.

Restricting the supply of tobacco could also help to tackle health inequalities in the country, researchers say. Previous work by the team has shown that the highest levels of tobacco availability tend to be in the most deprived areas.

The study, published in the journal *Tobacco Control*, was funded by the Medical Research Council and the Natural Environment Research Council.

Dr Tom Clemens, of the University of Edinburgh’s School of GeoSciences, who led the study, said: “Smoking during pregnancy is a critically important public health issue with lasting impacts for both mother and child. This study provides the strongest evidence to date of the need to tackle the supply of tobacco in order to reduce the prevalence of smoking.”

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Sheila Duffy, Chief Executive of ASH Scotland, said: “The environments people grow up in often influence their options for making healthy choices. In some communities, the harms caused by heavy smoking go hand in hand with tobacco being sold in most shops. Retailers need support to diversify away from selling a lethal, addictive product that Scotland is committed to putting out of sight, out of mind and completely out of fashion.”

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