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## Oxy's Offspring

Addiction. Crime sprees. And now, signs that a powerful painkiller may be infecting the nursery

By Debra Rosenberg  
NEWSWEEK

April 22 issue — Nancy Green had never heard of the prescription painkiller OxyContin when the first addict showed up at her office in the fall of 2000. Track marks studded the young woman's arm. And she was seven-months pregnant.



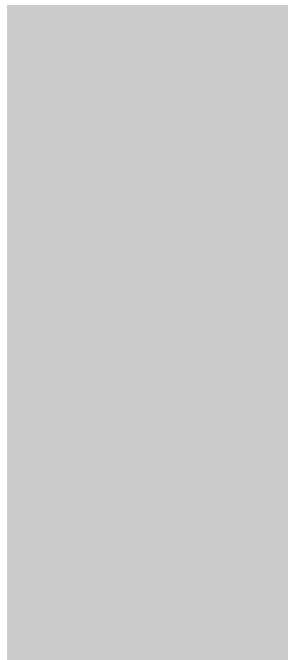
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GREEN, A CERTIFIED nurse midwife in the remote Maine town of Calais, has now become a drug counselor—and a reluctant expert on Maine’s epidemic of narcotic abuse. Of the 40 babies Green delivered last year, 10 were born to women hooked on opiates—and OxyContin was their drug of choice. Many babies suffered withdrawal in the nursery, crying inconsolably, shaking with tremors and fighting diarrhea, fever and convulsions. “The baby is getting the same drug as the mother,” says Dr. Loretta Finnegan, an expert on opiates and pregnancy. “There’s no barrier at all.”

First designed to treat severe, chronic pain, OxyContin—a synthetic form of heroin—took hold as a street drug. OxyContin abuse swept through parts of Appalachia and rural New England. The drug’s maker, Purdue Pharma, has tried to salvage its sullied name, offering grants to anti-drug groups (Green got \$5,000) and launching a \$6 million ad campaign preaching the perils of prescription-drug abuse. Despite those efforts, towns like Calais have begun to see signs that the Oxy scourge has hit the nursery. The number of reported cases so far is small—in the dozens—perhaps because doctors and law enforcement are still waking up to the problem. But the tallies at hospitals, clinics and jails suggest a disturbing trend is taking shape. In February, Maine’s Department of Human Services removed two Calais newborns from Oxy-addicted moms. In Kentucky, one woman was recently indicted for criminal abuse after she injected Oxy during pregnancy. OxyContin, like other opiates, doesn’t appear to cause severe birth defects. But the chaotic

cycles of highs and withdrawals can have dire consequences for mother and baby.

Pregnant Oxy users often know little about the drug's effects. When Terrilynn Lake found out she was expecting in the summer of 2000, she was crushing and snorting Oxy pills several times a day. Fellow addicts in Princeton, Maine, told her Oxy was safe because it came by prescription. Lake tried to quit anyway, but she was hooked. The Oxy calmed her and eased her pregnancy-related lower-back pain. "It was more of a body buzz," says Lake, now a trim, soft-spoken 22-year-old.

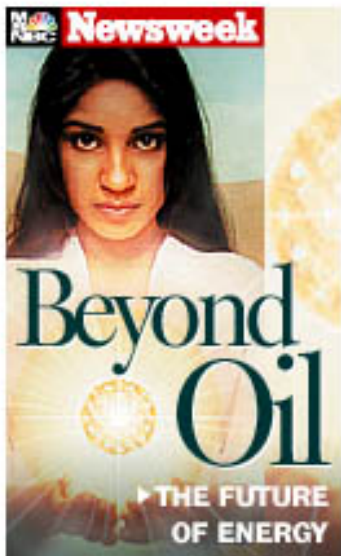


- [Audio: Debra Rosenberg, NEWSWEEK National Correspondent in Washington on New Danger: Oxycontin Babies](#)
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Oxy-abusing moms face a host of problems. They're more likely to contract HIV, hepatitis or other infections, says Finnegan. They're also likely to take other drugs, smoke cigarettes or drink alcohol, all of which pose dangers to the fetus. And every time the mother goes through withdrawal,

the baby does, too—a traumatic process that can cut the baby's oxygen supply, causing miscarriage, premature labor and intrauterine death. Opiate babies are often born early and at low birth weight, which puts them at risk for poor growth and developmental problems. The babies can be treated with drugs like methadone, but only if doctors realize what's wrong. Most new moms are reluctant to admit drug abuse. And OxyContin seems to elude standard drug tests, making the problem difficult to document.

Lake was relatively lucky. One day, in the eighth month of her pregnancy, she rushed to the Calais hospital with rapid, jittery contractions. She'd taken OxyContin and two other opiates that morning. A few days later she went through withdrawal and early labor simultaneously. At six pounds three ounces, Calla Sue wasn't low birth weight, but she did suffer some withdrawal symptoms. She was red-faced from constant crying. "She was jumpy," says Lake. "We would take pictures of her and she would flinch." Lake had already planned to send Calla Sue to live with her own mother, Cathy Bean, 42. But after her positive drug test, the state stepped in to ensure Lake wouldn't have custody. Lake says she's been clean since late last year. These days Lake visits cherubic Calla Sue at her mother's old farmhouse, watchful for any signs of



developmental delays.

Scientists still know little about opiates' long-term effects on babies. Many of the dire predictions about crack babies turned out to be hype. And Purdue Pharma stresses that OxyContin is not approved for use during pregnancy. At Eastern Maine Medical Center in Bangor, where the neonatal unit now usually houses at least one Oxy baby at all times, doctors are launching a program to follow the infants' progress after they leave the hospital. Their efforts may help determine whether Oxy babies are a blip—or an epidemic in the making.

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