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Betty Russell, Director
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617 638-8491**NEWS**Hold For Release
April 4, 1990Contact: Betty Russell
(617) 638-8491MATERNAL SMOKING ASSOCIATED WITH CHILDHOOD ASTHMA

Boston, Mass.--Mothers who smoke during pregnancy or when their children are very young may not only increase the risk of their children developing asthma but may also increase the likelihood that their children will develop asthma at an earlier age. A study, published in the April issue of the journal Pediatrics, suggests that environmental influences may contribute to or trigger the development of asthma, which is the number one chronic illness affecting children and which traditionally has been viewed as a genetic condition.

Researchers from Boston City Hospital (BCH), Boston University School of Medicine (BUSM) and the Harvard School of Public Health used data from a nationally representative sample of 4,331 children aged zero to five years gathered as part of the Child Health Supplement to the 1981 National Health Interview Survey. The researchers found very strong associations between maternal smoking and a number of factors related to asthma: Children of women who smoked more than half-a-pack of cigarettes a day were two times more likely to develop asthma, two times more likely to develop asthma during the first year of life and four times as likely to use physician prescribed medications for asthma.

"We were surprised by the magnitude of the association between maternal smoking and childhood asthma," says Michael Weitzman, M.D., the principal investigator of the study who is the director of the Division of General Pediatrics at BCH and an associate professor of pediatrics at BUSM. "The study suggests that maternal smoking may increase the likelihood that genetically predisposed children will develop the condition and that they will develop it at an earlier age."

Approximately three to five percent of American children develop asthma, which is the leading cause of hospitalizations, emergency room visits and school absenteeism in children. Although previous studies have suggested that passive exposure to cigarette smoke may cause respiratory problems or asthma, this is the first study to use a nationally representative sample and the only study that looked at the age of onset of asthma and maternal smoking.

Weitzman says the study provides such strong evidence of an association between maternal smoking and childhood asthma that: "Clearly, women should be encouraged not to smoke not only for their own health but for the well-being of their children. Women should be encouraged to quit smoking during pregnancy and during the first five years of their children's lives to help prevent them from developing this serious and sometimes life threatening condition." Traditionally, pediatricians have been encouraged to advise mothers to quit smoking on their children's behalf if the child already has asthma or recurrent respiratory problems.

Weitzman says maternal smoking is a major public health problem, and changes must be made in how maternal smoking is viewed and treated. He notes that while smoking cessation programs work, few communities offer them, physicians often do not refer pregnant women to them, and third-party payors do not pay for the them.

BCH is a major teaching hospital affiliated with BUSM.