Air pollution may raise risk of stillbirth and pregnant women should consider leaving cities, say scientists

[Sarah Knapton](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/authors/sarah-knapton/), science editor

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Pregnant women living in polluted areas may be at greater risk of stillbirth, new [research](http://oem.bmj.com/lookup/doi/10.1136/oemed-2015-103086)suggests.

Around 3,600 babies are stillborn each year in Britain and experts believe that many deaths are preventable.

Researchers at the [University of Oulu](http://www.oulu.fi/english/)in Finland analysed 13 studies looking into the impact of air pollution on stillbirth and found every four micrograms per metre cubed (ug/m3 ) increase in exposure to small particulate matter associated with a two per cent increased risk of stillbirth.

In inner London, the level of particular matter regularly reaches between 40 and 50  ug/m3 along busy roads suggesting that pregnant women living nearby are at greater risk than those residing in more rural areas.

The researchers called for tighter curbs on car exhausts and industrial waste to tackle the problem and advised pregnant women to move away from polluted areas if possible.

Professor Jouni Jaakkola, Faculty of Medicine, Center for Environmental and Respiratory Health Research, University of Oulu, Oulu, said: “The existing evidence is suggestive of causality for air pollution and stillbirth.”

Telling a pregnant woman to move to a greener area would be ‘wise advice,’ he added.

Dr Marie Pedersen, of the Centre for Epidemiology and Screening, University of Copenhagen, said: “Stillbirth is one of the most neglected tragedies in global health today, and the existing evidence deserves additional investigation.

“If the evidence of an association between ambient air population and stillbirth is confirmed in future studies, it would be of major public health importance.”

Prof Kevin McConway, Emeritus Professor of Applied Statistics, The Open University, said: “Whether or not there’s a link to stillbirth, it remains a good idea for governments and authorities to act on air pollution, since it has so many other health consequences.

“And I don’t think these new findings should be a serious cause for concern for individual pregnant women – if there is an increased risk of stillbirth, this review indicates that the increase is pretty small.”

Dr Alexander Heazell, Senior Clinical Lecturer in Obstetrics, University of Manchester, said: “Stillbirth is an important topic to investigate.

"Critically, we need to understand how environmental exposure relates to levels of chemicals in individual women and how this relates to stillbirth risk.”

The research was published in the journal of [Occupational & Environmental Medicine](http://oem.bmj.com/lookup/doi/10.1136/oemed-2015-103086).