

Let's Talk

ALCOHOL AND PREGNANCY

In every pregnancy, a woman starts out with a 3% to 5% chance of having a baby with a birth defect. This is called her background risk. Exposure to alcohol may increase the risk for birth defects above that background risk. The information in this sheet should not take the place of medical care and advice from your medical provider.

WHAT IS ALCOHOL?

Alcohol is the ingredient that gives beer, wine or hard liquor its intoxicating ("high") effect. The same amount of alcohol is found in a standard serving of beer, wine or hard liquor. A standard serving is considered to be 12 ounces of beer, 4 to 5 ounces of wine or 1.5 ounces of hard liquor.

IS THERE A SAFE AMOUNT OF ALCOHOL I CAN DRINK DURING PREGNANCY?

No. There is no established safe level of alcohol to consume during pregnancy. Alcohol crosses the placenta easily, but differences in genetics and metabolism of alcohol by both the mother and the developing baby may result in a wide range of risk. The level of risk may be different for each pregnancy — even for the same mother.

CAN DRINKING ALCOHOL MAKE IT HARDER FOR ME TO GET PREGNANT?

Some studies have shown an increase in fertility problems among women with heavy alcohol exposure. It is best to avoid alcohol while trying to get pregnant.

CAN DRINKING ALCOHOL CAUSE A MISCARRIAGE?

Some studies have found higher rates of miscarriage and stillbirth with alcohol use during pregnancy.

CAN DRINKING ALCOHOL DURING MY PREGNANCY CAUSE A BIRTH DEFECT?

Yes! Drinking alcohol during pregnancy is a leading cause of mental retardation. When a mother uses alcohol in large amounts and/or regularly during pregnancy, her baby is at risk for Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS). The features of FAS include a pattern of certain birth defects that include small head and body size, specific facial features, and learning and behavioral problems. FAS is the most severe outcome of alcohol use during pregnancy. When a child has some but not all of the effects of FAS, medical providers may use another term, such as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASDs).

The risks from heavy alcohol use and daily alcohol use have been well established. The risks from infrequent binge drinking (5 or more standard drinks at one sitting) are less clear. The risks for occasional use of lower amounts of alcohol are also not clear.

ARE THERE LONG-TERM ISSUES WITH FASDs?

Yes. FASDs are associated with lifelong challenges, such as difficulties with learning and memory. Individuals with an FASD are more likely to have difficulty understanding the consequences of their actions, have poor judgment and difficulty with social relationships. Higher rates of dropping out of school, mental health problems, and alcohol or drug abuse have also been reported in individuals with FASDs.

I JUST FOUND OUT I AM 6 WEEKS PREGNANT AND LAST WEEKEND I HAD ONE BEER. WILL MY BABY HAVE AN FASD?

While there is no safe amount of alcohol, a single drink is unlikely to cause a problem. The best thing you can do for your baby is to avoid further use of alcohol during your pregnancy.

Is binge drinking on only some days of the week as risky as drinking alcohol everyday but at lower amounts? Possibly but it is not clear. Binge drinking provides the highest alcohol dose to the developing baby at one time. However, studies on alcohol use during pregnancy often calculate weekly averages, so the effects of certain patterns of drinking alcohol are not well studied.

IS IT OK TO DRINK AFTER THE FIRST TRIMESTER?

No! Alcohol has a direct effect on brain development. The brain develops throughout the whole pregnancy. This means drinking any time in pregnancy increases the risk for having alcohol-related brain damage. Therefore, there is no safe period to drink during pregnancy. Recent studies do not link second and third trimester alcohol exposure directly with low birth weight, although it is linked with an increased risk for small head size.

HOW WILL I KNOW IF ALCOHOL HAS HURT MY BABY?

If you or others are concerned about your alcohol intake, it is important to discuss this with your medical provider. A detailed ultrasound may be offered to you to look for birth defects. Usually, an ultrasound cannot see whether alcohol has affected the baby's brain. However, one of the signs of FASDs is decreased growth, which can be evaluated on an ultrasound.

Once your baby is born, it is also recommended you tell your pediatrician about your alcohol use during pregnancy. Your baby can be evaluated for effects of alcohol exposure. Services and support are available for children with alcohol-related problems.



Information sourced from the Organization of Teratology Information Specialists (OTIS).

CAN A BABY GO THROUGH WITHDRAWAL AFTER BIRTH?

Yes, if the mother has been drinking close to delivery. There are reports of withdrawal symptoms in infants whose mothers consumed alcohol near delivery. Symptoms include tremors, increased muscle tone, restlessness and excessive crying.

IS THERE ANY HOPE FOR A BABY WHO HAS BEEN EXPOSED TO ALCOHOL THROUGHOUT PREGNANCY?

Yes. It is always recommended for a pregnant woman to stop her alcohol use, regardless of how far along in her pregnancy she is. The baby will benefit by no longer being exposed to alcohol. Though FASDs cannot be cured, children with FASDs benefit from early diagnosis. The best outcomes occur when these children are diagnosed early and receive appropriate support and assistance. Being raised in a stable and nurturing home where basic living and social skills can be taught leads to better outcomes for children with FASDs.

CAN I DRINK ALCOHOL WHILE BREASTFEEDING?

Alcohol passes into the breast milk. The concentration of alcohol in the breast milk is close to the concentration of alcohol in the woman's bloodstream. Alcohol can pass back and forth from the bloodstream into the breast milk. Only time can reduce the amount of alcohol in the breast milk. It takes about 2 to 2.5 hours for each standard drink to clear from breast milk. For each additional drink, a woman must wait another 2 to 2.5 hours per drink. Alcohol may also reduce the amount of milk you produce.

Effects on the infant from alcohol in the breast milk are not well studied, but there have been reports of reduced infant feeding and changes in infant sleep patterns. Impaired motor development following exposure to alcohol in the breast milk was seen in one study but not another. Since breastfeeding has documented benefits for the baby, speak with your pediatrician about your specific alcohol intake before avoiding breastfeeding. Be sure to talk to your medical provider about all your choices for breastfeeding.

For more information, please visit
LetsTalkFASDak.org  