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## Alcohol and pregnancy

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### Summary

- There is no safe level of alcohol consumption in pregnancy.
  - It is safest not to drink alcohol while you are pregnant.
  - If you are planning on becoming pregnant, it is safest if you stop drinking while you are trying to conceive.
  - The risk to your unborn baby is highest when you frequently drink high levels of alcohol.
  - The risk to your unborn baby is likely to be low if you drank a small amount of alcohol before you knew you were pregnant.
  - If you drink alcohol while you are pregnant there is no way to predict how your alcohol consumption will affect your unborn baby.
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If you're pregnant -- or trying to get pregnant -- you may be wondering whether it's okay to drink **alcohol**.

All the research on alcohol and pregnancy so far is clear: there is no safe level of alcohol use during pregnancy.

In fact, there are five important points to know about alcohol and pregnancy:

- For both women and men, it is safest to stop drinking alcohol before you conceive.
- It is safest not to drink alcohol at all while you're pregnant.
- The risk to your unborn baby is highest when you frequently drink high levels of alcohol.
- The risk to your unborn baby is likely to be low if you drank small amounts of alcohol before you knew you were pregnant.
- Every woman and unborn baby is different, so there's no way to predict how your alcohol consumption will affect your unborn baby.

### Drinking alcohol puts your unborn baby at risk

When you're pregnant, the alcohol you drink passes from your blood to your baby's blood through the placenta.

When you drink, your unborn baby can get about the same concentration of alcohol in its blood as you do in yours. This alcohol can potentially harm your baby's developing brain and restrict its physical and cognitive growth and development.

Some of the most serious risks of exposing your unborn baby to alcohol are:

- slowed fetal growth
- low birth weight
- premature birth
- **miscarriage** (losing a baby before 24 weeks of pregnancy)
- **stillbirth** (a baby being born dead after 24 weeks of pregnancy)
- a range of physical, mental, behavioural and learning disabilities that are collectively called **fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD)**.

### Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is a range of physical, mental, behavioural and learning disabilities that someone may experience due to their mother consuming alcohol during pregnancy.

There is currently no information on the level of alcohol consumption that causes FASD, therefore avoidance of alcohol during pregnancy is recommended as a preventative measure.

It is not currently known how many people have FASD in Australia. Experts suspect there are more cases than are

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reported. The 2016 National Drug Strategy Household Survey found one quarter (25 per cent) of women continued to drink after finding out they were pregnant.

Read more about [FASD](#).

### **Drinking alcohol also puts pregnant women at risk**

Women who drink while pregnant may also put their own health at risk, due to effects such as:

- vomiting and dehydration
- high blood pressure
- nutritional deficiency
- gestational diabetes.

### **There's no safe amount of alcohol during pregnancy**

[Australia's national guidelines for alcohol consumption](#) from the National Health and Medical Research Council say it's safest not to drink at all:

- while you are pregnant
- when you are trying to conceive
- while you are breastfeeding (because the alcohol can pass into the breast milk and may affect a baby's feeding and sleeping patterns, and physical and cognitive development).

Heavy drinking -- drinking daily or binge drinking -- carries the greatest risk to your unborn baby, but even one or two drinks a week may still cause damage to your unborn baby (although this risk is likely to be small). See the [guidelines](#) for more advice on levels of drinking and standard drinks in Australia.

If you're having trouble reducing or stopping your alcohol consumption, talk to your healthcare professional for advice and support.

### **Drinking alcohol before you knew you were pregnant**

The risk to your unborn baby from low level drinking before you know you are pregnant is likely to be low.

If you drank alcohol before you knew you were pregnant, it may be helpful to know that the majority of babies exposed to small amounts alcohol suffer no observable harm.

Read more about [alcohol and pregnancy](#) in this fact sheet from The Royal Women's Hospital.

### **Is it okay for men to drink alcohol when trying for a baby?**

Studies suggest that the quality of sperm is significantly reduced by regular alcohol consumption. This reduces the chances of a couple getting pregnant. It is also thought that a man's alcohol consumption before conception could lead to developmental problems for the child in the future, both intellectual and physical. Reducing the amount of alcohol, you drink or cutting it out altogether three months before trying to conceive is recommended.

Studies have also suggested that women are less likely to drink during their pregnancies if their partners also abstain.

### **Remember...**

- for both women and men, it is safest to stop drinking alcohol while you are trying to conceive.
- there is no safe level of alcohol consumption in pregnancy. It is safest not to drink alcohol at all while you are pregnant.
- the risk to your unborn baby is highest when you frequently drink high levels of alcohol.
- the risk to your unborn baby is likely to be low if you drank small amounts of alcohol before you knew you were pregnant.
- if you drink alcohol while you are pregnant there is no way to predict how your alcohol consumption will affect your unborn baby.

### **Where to get help**

If you're having trouble reducing or stopping your alcohol consumption, talk to:

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**[betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://betterhealth.vic.gov.au)**

- your doctor or midwife
- **DirectLine** alcohol and drug counselling and referral Tel. 1800 888 236
- **Women's Alcohol and Drug Service** Tel. (03) 8345 3931
- **National Organisation for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (NOFASD)** Tel. 1300 306 238
- **your local community health service**
- Family Drug Help Tel. 1300 660 068
- an **alcohol or other drug helpline** in your state or territory Tel. 1300 368 186 (national support line, 24/7)

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