Alcohol and pregnancy

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.
- Even low-level drinking, particularly in the first trimester of pregnancy, can have long-term negative effects on the baby.
- If you drink alcohol while you are pregnant there is no way to tell how it will affect your unborn baby.

If you're pregnant -- or trying to get pregnant -- you may be wondering whether it's okay to drink alcohol.

The latest research on alcohol and pregnancy says 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.
- There is evidence to suggest that even low-level drinking, particularly in the first trimester of pregnancy, can result in long-term negative effects to the baby.
- Every woman and unborn baby are different, so there's no way to tell 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 can 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 fetal alcohol exposure.

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

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

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
The Australian guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol from the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) 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.

See the NHMRC 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're pregnant is not fully understood but may affect the developing baby.

It is recommended that you stop drinking as soon as you know you are pregnant to help prevent any potential harm. You may want to talk to your healthcare professional for support to stop drinking, as this can be hard to do for some people. See Alcohol and pregnancy on The Royal Women's Hospital website.

Is it okay for men to drink alcohol when trying for a baby?
Studies suggest that the quality of sperm is significantly reduced if you drink alcohol regularly. 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. When pregnant women have support from people around them, it can make saying no to alcohol a lot easier.

See Pregnant Pause, where partners and friends can make an alcohol-free pledge in support of their pregnant partner or friend.

Where to get help
If you're having trouble reducing or stopping your alcohol consumption, talk to:
- Your GP (doctor) or midwife
- DirectLine alcohol and drug counselling and referral Tel. 1800 888 236
- Women's Alcohol and Drug Service Tel. (03) 6345 3931
- National Organisation for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (NOFASD) Tel. 1300 306 238

betterhealth.vic.gov.au
• your local community health service
• Family Drug Help Tel. **1300 660 068**
• DrugInfo for free confidential advice on alcohol and other drugs Tel. **1300 85 85 84**

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