

Alcohol during pregnancy

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Remember, the information on this fact sheet should not be used or relied on as an alternative to professional care. If you have a particular problem, see your health care professional.

Pregnancy and alcohol do not mix.

- Alcohol can affect your unborn child for life.
- **The safest choice is not to drink any alcohol at all during pregnancy or if there is a chance you may become pregnant.**

Alcohol can cross the placenta to your unborn baby and affect your baby's health and development.

- The alcohol will reach your unborn baby very quickly and its blood alcohol level will be the same as yours.

Alcohol can harm a baby at any stage during the pregnancy.

- Stopping drinking alcohol at any time during pregnancy improves the outlook for a baby's development.

Try finding non-alcoholic drinks that you really enjoy. Some women enjoy drinks that have a bit of a bite, like bitter lemon. There are also non alcoholic wines or grape juices available.

What level of alcohol is safe for babies?

- There is no 'safe' amount of alcohol to drink.
- We do know damage to babies is more likely to occur with frequent heavy drinking.
- Most women who drink a little alcohol during pregnancy (one or less standard drinks a day) appear to have babies who have not been affected

by alcohol, but some babies have been affected by small amounts of alcohol.

As we do not know what a safe level of alcohol is during pregnancy, less alcohol is better, but no alcohol is the best and safest choice.

Unplanned pregnancy

Around half of all pregnancies are not planned and you may not know you are pregnant until about the 6th week of your pregnancy or later. Babies are at risk from alcohol in the early weeks of pregnancy, particularly in the first 8 weeks.

- If you have already drunk small amounts of alcohol during your pregnancy, the risk to your baby is low, but heavy drinking (such as binge drinking) during that time can cause problems for the baby, especially if other drugs are also used.
- Stopping drinking as soon as you know that you are pregnant is the safest choice and will increase your chances of having a healthy baby.

It is important to discuss your alcohol use with your doctor, midwife or professional support person.

Effects of alcohol on unborn babies

The development of the baby's cells and organs can be affected differently by alcohol at different stages during pregnancy.

- The first three months (first trimester), when organs are being formed, is particularly sensitive and heavy drinking during this time can cause babies to be born with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS).
 - This means they may weigh less than expected at birth, have a smaller head, unusual facial features and damage to their organs such as the heart and kidneys.
 - These babies go on to have a delay in their development, and learning and behaviour problems.
- Most babies who are affected by alcohol will not have all the signs of FAS.
 - Alcohol can affect the way the baby's brain develops at any stage of the pregnancy and may cause serious lifelong disabilities without all the features of FAS.
 - These babies are said to have Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).
- There is no cure for FAS or FASD.
- FASD is the most common preventable cause of birth defects and brain damage in unborn children.



An Australian Government Initiative

For more information on this topic or any issues related to pregnancy, birth or babies, call the free 24 hour helpline:

1800 882 436



Resources

Alcohol and Drug Information
Service in your state or territory.

The National Organisation for Fetal
Alcohol Syndrome and Related
Disorders Inc. (NOFASARD)
<http://www.nofasard.org.au/>

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