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ISBN 0-7785-2716-6

Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse  
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# Alcohol and Pregnancy

## PREVENTING FASD

If you're pregnant or thinking about getting pregnant, you might be wondering if alcohol can harm your developing baby. You may also be wondering if it's safe to drink if you are pregnant. Here are the answers to some key questions about alcohol and pregnancy:

### How is the fetus affected by alcohol?

How a developing fetus is affected by the mother's drinking depends on many things, like:

- how much the mother drinks during pregnancy
- when in the pregnancy the mother drinks
- how often the mother drinks
- how well the mother's body breaks down the alcohol
- the ability of the fetus to handle alcohol
- the use of drugs, other than alcohol
- other factors, like the mother's nutrition and smoking habits

What we do know is that alcohol can harm the fetus. What we don't know is how much alcohol it takes to cause the harm. So, no alcohol during pregnancy is best.

### What is Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)?

You may have heard the terms *fetal alcohol syndrome* (FAS) and *fetal alcohol effects* (FAE). *Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder* (FASD) is a term used to describe the range of symptoms seen in some children born to women who drank alcohol during pregnancy. Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder includes FAS and FAE.

Babies with FASD may:

- be small for their age
- have a small head
- have facial abnormalities
- have problems with their heart or other vital organs
- be restless and have difficulty sleeping

Individuals with FASD have brain damage that is permanent. Some of the problems they may experience in their life include:

- problems with hearing and vision
- high activity levels
- problems learning in school
- speech impairments
- difficulty adjusting to changes in routine
- social problems
- eating and sleeping problems
- difficulty following directions
- poor memory
- poor coordination

### **If I'm pregnant, how much can I drink?**

No one knows for sure how much alcohol is safe for a pregnant woman to drink. Most doctors and researchers say that it's safest not to drink if you're pregnant and while breastfeeding (since alcohol is passed to the baby through breast milk). No alcohol is best.

### **Is drinking at certain times during my pregnancy safer than at other times?**

Right now, research doesn't indicate a safe time. Since the fetus is growing all through the pregnancy, alcohol might cause harm at any time. A baby can also be affected by alcohol passed through breast milk.

### **I'm pregnant and I think I may have a drinking problem.**

#### **What can I do?**

Remember that it is never too late to stop drinking. At any time in your pregnancy, cutting back on how much you drink, or stopping altogether, will help. If you are having trouble controlling your drinking or stopping, seek help. In Alberta, AADAC offers treatment programs that specifically address the special needs of women. You may also want to talk to your doctor or community health nurse about alcohol and pregnancy.