

Pregnancy and Alcohol Use

What are the risks if I drink when pregnant?

There are a number of risks to your developing baby if you drink alcohol when pregnant.

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is the name for the range of harms caused by alcohol use during pregnancy. These harms can include brain damage, vision and hearing problems, slow growth, and birth defects, such as bones that are not properly formed and heart problems.

Brain damage can mean that your child will have lifelong learning disabilities and problems with memory, reasoning and judgment.

How much alcohol is risky?

It is safest not to drink at all when you are pregnant or when you are planning on becoming pregnant.

It is known that alcohol can harm the baby, but *exactly how much* alcohol it takes to cause the harm is not known.

The potential harm to the developing baby is influenced by the following factors:

- How much alcohol is used;
- If other drugs are being used at the same time;
- The mother's overall health and safety;
- Genetics, and many other factors.

Is there any safe time to drink alcohol during pregnancy?

There is no safe time to drink alcohol during pregnancy. The baby's brain and nervous system develop all throughout pregnancy.

What drinks are harmful?

All drinks with alcohol can be harmful to your developing baby. Alcohol is in beer, wine, hard liquor, coolers and ciders.

Drinking more than two drinks on any one-day, and drinking regularly are the most harmful. A drink means a can of beer (350 ml/12 oz), a glass of wine (150/ml/5 oz), or a shot of hard liquor (40 ml/1.5 oz).

What if I drank alcohol before knowing I was pregnant?

It is not uncommon that pregnant women drink alcohol before knowing they are pregnant, given that over 50 per cent of births in Canada are not planned. Even if you did drink, it is important to know that it is *never* too late to stop drinking alcohol during pregnancy.

Quitting drinking now and looking after your own health are the best ways to reduce the risk of harm to your baby.

What else can I do to reduce the risks?

As well as not drinking alcohol, there are other steps you can take to be healthy and to protect your developing baby, including:

- Get plenty of rest;
- See your doctor, nurse or midwife regularly;
- Eat healthy food;
- Stop or cut down on your use of cigarettes and other drugs; and
- Reduce your stress. The stress from stopping drinking is not as harmful to your baby as the alcohol itself. So, it is better to quit or cut down on your drinking. You can reduce stress by going for walks,

taking a warm bath, or talking with a supportive friend or family member.

How can I prepare for medical visits?

Some women find it hard to talk about their alcohol use with their health care providers. It can help to write down your questions before your visit. It may also be helpful to bring a support person with you such as a friend, partner, or community support worker. Getting regular medical care is an important step. Even if you are still drinking alcohol, know that all the efforts you are making to take care of your health - such as getting medical care - are important.

How can others support pregnant women?

Partners, families and friends play an important role in supporting women to cut down or stop drinking during pregnancy. Support can be provided in a number of different ways:

Communicate

- Tell her that you care about her as well as the baby.
- Let her share her feelings.
- Be sincere, caring and non-judgmental – do not take her alcohol use personally.

Assist

- Offer practical support including helping with transportation to appointments or treatment.
- Offer to care for other children.
- Share activities that do not include alcohol - for example go to the movies or go for a walk.

Encourage

- Recognize her efforts and celebrate small successes.
- Offer to work through problems and barriers to change together.
- Ask if there are any other ways you can support her.

What supports are available if I find it hard to stop drinking?

There are a variety of services to support you, such as pregnancy outreach programs, maternity care clinics, and alcohol and drug counselling services. Contact your local public health unit to find out about services in your area.

If you need help from an alcohol counselor, you can call the Alcohol and Drug Information and Referral Service. Ask for information on where counseling is available in your area. In Greater Vancouver, call 604-660-9382, and outside Greater Vancouver, call toll-free 1-800-663-1441.

Pregnancy Outreach Programs are available to support pregnant women to have healthy babies in over 45 communities across BC. To find a Pregnancy Outreach Program in your area, visit the BC Association of Pregnancy Outreach Programs Web site at www.bcapop.ca, or call your local public health unit.

For more BC HealthFile topics visit www.bchealthguide.org/healthfiles/index.stm, or visit your local public health unit.

Call the BC NurseLine to speak to a registered nurse, available 24-hours every day:

- In Greater Vancouver, call 604-215-4700
- In BC, call toll-free 1-866-215-4700
- Deaf and hearing-impaired, call 1-866-889-4700
- Pharmacist available 5pm to 9am every day
- Translation services in over 130 languages upon request.

Visit BC HealthGuide OnLine – a world of health information you can trust at www.bchealthguide.org