

with child
without alcohol

What you should know about alcohol and pregnancy.



with child
without alcohol

MYTHS ABOUT PREGNANCY

There are many myths surrounding pregnancy. Most of them are harmless ideas that people have passed down through the generations. You've probably heard some of them yourself.

Some people say that pregnant women have a natural glow. *They may be right.*

Others say if a woman is carrying high, the child is going to be a girl. *They may be right.*

And some people say that "social drinking" while a woman is pregnant won't hurt the baby. *They may be wrong about this.*

In fact, the truth is that the only absolutely safe amount of alcohol for a pregnant woman is absolutely none at all.



BECAUSE YOU CARE

You've called for this information kit because you are concerned about the effects alcohol can have on a baby's prenatal development. Perhaps you are planning to become pregnant. Perhaps you know someone who is pregnant right now and still drinking. You may even be pregnant yourself and wondering if the alcohol you drank before you knew you were pregnant has affected your unborn baby. Or perhaps you are the parent of a child you suspect may have a disability caused by prenatal alcohol exposure.

The purpose of this kit is to help you better understand the effects alcohol can have on a developing fetus. It also provides you with places you can turn to for help if your child was born with alcohol-related disabilities. Because information is what allows us to make the best decisions for helping our children grow up happy and healthy.



Dr. Sally Longstaffe
Pediatrician, Health Sciences Centre

As a pediatrician, I see lots of children whose potential has been limited because their mothers drank while they were pregnant.

Alcohol is an enormous part of our social lives. I know that it's not always easy to be forward thinking about alcohol and the potential for pregnancy. But if the opportunity exists for a woman to become pregnant, she should avoid alcohol. Family, friends and partners can support a woman who has made that choice by not drinking themselves and by making sure she is not left out from social activities.

The most accurate reflection of the state of our medical knowledge right now is in the phrase with child, without alcohol. A baby's cells develop throughout the nine months of pregnancy, which means alcohol can disrupt development and hurt the baby at any point. When a woman drinks during pregnancy, she's risking her child's potential because there are no cures for disabilities caused by prenatal alcohol exposure.

It's like your seatbelt. You might drive to the store and not get into an accident. Or you might be seriously hurt or fatally injured.

Please, for the sake of your child, make the right choice — with child, without alcohol. It's a gift to yourself and to the whole community.

Dr. Sally Longstaffe
Pediatrician, Health Sciences Centre



THE TRUTH ABOUT ALCOHOL DURING PREGNANCY

Think about this for a moment:

Although one drink may not have visibly dramatic effects on an adult, it still results in changes in the body as it is processed. First, it's absorbed through the stomach and intestine, and then passes into the liver for further processing. Finally, it is distributed through the bloodstream to the rest of the body.

That's a lot of processing... and that's a *fully-grown, healthy adult.*

Now imagine what happens when a pregnant woman drinks alcohol. Her body processes alcohol the same way, but there is one key difference: she will also pass alcohol to her baby, who can't process alcohol in the same way as an adult. One drink — even just a glass of wine — causes immediate changes in the baby's breathing and blood flow to the brain.

One drink during pregnancy may not permanently affect a child. The problem is that *no one, including medical experts, can say how much alcohol is safe because the answer for each person is different.* Genetics, age, nutrition and when a woman drinks during her pregnancy all play a role in how the fetus is affected.

And before you tell yourself you know how much is too much, remember these two undeniable truths:

- 1. Drinking alcohol during pregnancy is the one and only cause of prenatal alcohol-related disabilities — the most easily identified is fetal alcohol syndrome.**
- 2. The only absolutely safe amount of alcohol for pregnant women is absolutely none at all.**

FAS AND OTHER ALCOHOL-RELATED BIRTH DEFECTS

Many people have heard of fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS).

Fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) is an alcohol-related birth defect. FAS is associated with severe behavioural and physical disabilities, including malformed bones, muscles and vital organs, as well as damage to the brain, which means that the child will behave differently than children who were not exposed to alcohol prenatally.

Many people think alcohol-related disabilities are rare and only affect children whose mothers went on “drinking binges” during pregnancy. The truth is that alcohol-related birth defects are much more common than people think because there is actually a wide range of conditions that can result – FAS is just the most easily identified. Other disabilities caused by prenatal alcohol exposure will still alter the way a child lives, learns and plays for the rest of his or her life. These conditions are much more subtle and often aren’t noticed until a child goes to school. They are also conditions that can be caused by very little alcohol – what some people call “social drinking.”

With support, children may learn how to cope with alcohol-related disabilities and lead happy and fulfilling lives. But they will always have their disability. It’s not something they will outgrow. It’s not an illness that has a cure. It’s a life-long condition that will affect everything they do for the rest of their lives.

RANGE OF EFFECTS

- Reduced IQ
- Hyperactivity
- Reduced attention span
- Comprehension difficulties
- Learning disorders
- Mild to severe behaviour problems
- Speech and vision impairment
- Physical malformations
- Growth deficiencies
- Central nervous system dysfunction
- Reduced life span



How much is too much?

Social drinking is a term people use when they drink what they consider to be a very moderate or reasonable amount of alcohol in a social setting. Many people still mistakenly believe that social drinking can't hurt an unborn child. The truth is that the effects of social drinking may be subtle, but they do occur. Binge drinking, on the other hand, puts the baby at great risk for visible alcohol-related disabilities.

However you define the terms "social drinking" and "binge drinking" – and definitions do vary from person to person – the point is that any amount of alcohol has the potential to hurt a developing fetus.

When a woman is pregnant, any amount of alcohol is too much. And the more a woman drinks, the greater the risk to the baby.



BEFORE... AND AFTER

Since alcohol-related disabilities are caused by only one thing – alcohol – prevention might seem simple: No alcohol – no alcohol-related disabilities. Unfortunately, it's not always that simple. Women drink for many reasons – and the decision to turn down a drink isn't always made easily. Some women drink to cope with stress or other problems. Some women may be addicted to alcohol. And many women are encouraged to drink in social settings. In many of these situations, women may even be drinking without realizing they're pregnant.

Improving Futures

Intervention and therapy for a child who is affected by alcohol may prevent...

- *Suspension, expulsion or dropping out from school*
- *Inappropriate sexual behaviour*
- *Drug and alcohol abuse*
- *Difficulty with authority and even the law*

Likewise, intervention and therapy may help the child or adult to...

- *Live independently*
- *Perform well in school*
- *Find gainful and fulfilling employment*

Some people make a dedicated effort to have children. For others, pregnancy is an unexpected occurrence. The ideal situation is to stop drinking if the possibility of becoming pregnant exists. While this is ideal, it simply doesn't always happen that way.

So, the best thing a woman can do is to stop drinking immediately when she finds out she is pregnant. This may sound obvious, but studies have shown that many women drink at some point after they find out they're pregnant. If a woman stops drinking immediately, she lessens the likelihood that the child will be affected by alcohol.

There is, of course, a chance that the alcohol a woman drank before finding out she is pregnant has already affected the child. Nothing can reverse these effects, but when a woman stops drinking, she is preventing any more harm from being done. The child will still face challenges throughout life, but with love, support, knowledge, understanding and perhaps help from a professional, the child can still have a fulfilling life.

Resources in the community, such as information, support and services, can assist parents who are raising children affected by prenatal alcohol exposure. With support, parents can give their children the knowledge, skills and learning tools they need to achieve their fullest potential. Raising any child takes love, patience, understanding and hard work. Children affected by alcohol need a great deal of extra encouragement, but when parents seek out appropriate support – for themselves and the affected children – they can optimize outcomes.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Pregnancy is a nine-month process of change and development – both for the child and the expectant mother. It's certainly not something anyone goes through entirely by themselves. The love and support of the people in the life of a mother-to-be is an all-important factor in making those nine months easier. And this is just as true when it comes to issues of drinking while pregnant.

AS A HUSBAND OR LIFE PARTNER

Be United: It's a proven fact that if the partner keeps drinking, it becomes harder for a woman to stop. Show your support by stopping while she's pregnant.

Be Aware: Don't let your partner feel excluded because she's not drinking. Make sure she knows you're there for her whenever she needs you.

Be Caring: She's your partner and the mother of your child. Give her all the support she needs – especially when it comes to not drinking.

AS A FRIEND

Be Proactive: A true friend won't pour or even offer alcohol to a pregnant friend no matter what the occasion may be.

Be Supportive: Tell your pregnant friend how proud you are about her decision not to drink... and try not to drink in her presence.

Be Understanding: Don't exclude a pregnant friend from the group because she isn't drinking. Think of an activity that doesn't involve alcohol.

AS A PARENT

Be Informed: Educate yourself about alcohol and pregnancy. Talk to your doctor and don't be afraid to get a second opinion.

Be Bold: We all need help sometimes. Parenting isn't easy and it can be more challenging when your child is alcohol-affected. Don't be afraid to look for resources to help, such as the ones listed in this package.

Be Proud: Give your child every opportunity and tool you can so your child can achieve his or her fullest potential.

Be A Parent: The single greatest thing any parent can do for their child – alcohol-affected or not – is to love them, unconditionally. There will always be challenges in life. Your love and support give them the strength to persevere.



Hope... and Help

Every child is special. Children affected by alcohol, however, have different needs and different potentials than other children. They will face more challenges and obstacles throughout life. But many of those obstacles may be overcome – with help.

If you suspect your child may have FAS or another alcohol-related disability or you're afraid that you cannot give up alcohol for the duration of your pregnancy, there are places you can turn to for help:



"I drank while I was pregnant."

Shelley,
Mother and with child without alcohol spokesperson

Manitoba Liquor Control Commission:

our commitment to Manitobans

As the organization responsible for the purchase, sale and control of beverage alcohol in the province, the Manitoba Liquor Control Commission also has a responsibility to promote safe, healthy and responsible use of beverage alcohol.

The MLCC believes people should be able to enjoy alcohol products. But this enjoyment should never come at the expense of anyone's health and well-being. This is why the MLCC is taking a leadership role in providing education and awareness information toward the prevention of prenatal alcohol exposure.

Alcohol-related disabilities caused by prenatal alcohol exposure have no cure, but they can be prevented. The MLCC is committed to providing information to help prevent these disabilities. Because caring for our community is everyone's responsibility.

FAS Information Manitoba

1-866-877-0050

Funded by the Manitoba Government's Healthy Child Initiative and Health Canada

www.mlcc.mb.ca



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