

Alcohol and pregnancy

There is no known safe amount or time to drink alcohol during pregnancy.



The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) recommend to reduce the risk of harm to their unborn child, women who are pregnant or planning pregnancy should not drink alcohol.

How is alcohol harmful to unborn babies?

Alcohol is a teratogen, which means it can interrupt the normal development of an unborn baby. The potential outcome from alcohol exposure may vary and can be permanent and lifelong.

A mother's placenta does not protect a baby from alcohol. When a woman drinks alcohol, it passes to the baby, which means the baby receives a similar concentration of alcohol as the mother.

A baby's brain grows and develops throughout pregnancy. Alcohol can interfere with the chemicals necessary for normal brain development. A baby's developing brain is more vulnerable to damage than a mature adult brain. Drinking alcohol at any time during pregnancy, even at low levels, can harm the development of the unborn baby.

Alcohol use when pregnant can cause a range of lifelong physical, mental and behavioural disabilities, known as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD).

Some problems people with FASD might experience can include:

- **Growth and birth defects**, such as distinctive facial features, joint and limb abnormalities, heart and kidney defects, and growth problems.
- **Intellectual problems**, such as memory and learning issues, difficulties with speech and language, cognitive deficits, difficulty with judgement, reasoning or understanding consequences of actions.
- **Behavioural problems**, such as hyperactivity and increased irritability, in addition to social and emotional issues.

Alcohol exposure can also cause miscarriage, stillbirth, premature birth and low birth weight.

What about planning a pregnancy?

The NHMRC recommend women who are pregnant or planning pregnancy should not drink alcohol. A baby's brain starts to grow very early in pregnancy, often before the mother knows she is pregnant.

What if alcohol was drunk before finding out about pregnancy?

If a woman drinks alcohol without knowing she is pregnant it does not automatically mean the baby will be harmed. It's important to know it's never too late to stop drinking – every effort made to stop drinking alcohol, or reduce the amount of alcohol consumed, lowers the risk, and benefits the mother's health.

If you or someone you know is pregnant, or concerned that alcohol has been consumed in early pregnancy, or are having trouble stopping drinking, speak with your health care professional. Every pregnancy is different and there are a range of factors that play a role in determining the risk of harm to the baby.

Tips to avoid alcohol when pregnant or planning a pregnancy.

It can be difficult to avoid alcohol in social situations, particularly in the early stages when trying to keep the pregnancy a secret.

Women tell us some of the easiest ways to help them stay alcohol-free is by:

- Having alcohol-free alternatives.
- Arranging social gatherings where alcohol is not a key feature.
- Having a strong support network, which includes partners and friends expressing their support in a woman's decision to not drink alcohol, and joining her in not drinking.
- Having an excuse prepared for why you're not drinking, particularly when wanting the pregnancy to remain secret in the early stages.

If drinking at home is part of the normal routine, consider alternatives to drinking alcohol that might help to relax or wind down, such as taking a bath, going for a walk or listening to a podcast.

Is there support for women who are concerned about their alcohol use, or find it difficult to stop during pregnancy?

If women are concerned about their alcohol use in early pregnancy, or have trouble stopping drinking, it is recommended they contact their doctor, midwife, obstetrician or community health nurse for support and appropriate referral to services.

For anyone concerned about their own or another person's alcohol or drug use, including during pregnancy, the Alcohol and Drug Support Line is a free, confidential, non-judgemental telephone counselling, information and referral service.

The Alcohol and Drug Support Line is available 24 hours a day on **9442 5000** or **1800 198 024** (toll-free for country callers).

For more information, head to alcoholthinkagain.com.au