

Alcohol and pregnancy.

No alcohol is the safest choice.

Why is alcohol harmful to an unborn baby?

Alcohol is a teratogen. A teratogen is any agent that can disturb the development of an embryo or fetus. If a fetus is exposed to alcohol it can result in a range of adverse effects to the brain and organs of the unborn child.

The reason alcohol should be avoided is because it can affect the development of the baby throughout pregnancy – there is no safe time to drink alcohol during pregnancy.

If a woman stops drinking before she gets pregnant, she can avoid exposing her baby to alcohol in the early stages of pregnancy. The early stages of pregnancy sees the fetus being most vulnerable to structural damage in the first three to six weeks of gestation. The effects of alcohol consumption on the fetus can occur throughout the duration of the pregnancy.

Women who have drunk alcohol before they knew they were pregnant should know that stopping drinking may reduce the risk to the baby.

Women who are concerned about their alcohol use during pregnancy or their child's development, should talk to a health professional.

What is Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder?

The nature and degree of harm to the baby due to alcohol can be hard to predict. The range of adverse effects to the brain and organs of the unborn child is collectively known as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders.

One of these disorders is fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS). Children with FAS can experience a range of cognitive, behavioural and physical impairments and are characterised by:

- Facial abnormalities including: a thin upper lip, smooth philtrum, upturned nose, flat nasal bridge, epicanthal fold
- Impaired growth
- Abnormal structure and function of central nervous system
- Limb defects
- Intellectual and learning disabilities
- Musculoskeletal defects
- Speech and language delays
- Behavioural difficulties
- Poor social skills.

What about breastfeeding?

The NHMRC Guideline recommend for breastfeeding mothers not drinking is the safest option. This is particularly important in the first month after delivery until breastfeeding is well established.

If breastfeeding mothers choose to drink the Guidelines recommend no more than two standard drinks on any day. Breastfeeding women should try to avoid drinking immediately before breastfeeding.

Evidence has shown alcohol adversely affects lactation, infant behaviour (e.g. feeding, arousal) and psychomotor development of the breastfed baby.

For women who are pregnant or planning a pregnancy, no alcohol is the safest choice.

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