

alcohol and pregnancy

supporting health and life



Alcohol use can cause adverse effects on the physical and mental development of the child. It can also increase the risk of congenital defects. The spectrum of disorders related to alcohol use in pregnancy is referred to as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). FASD includes a range of physical, mental and behavioural effects and learning disabilities. FASD has been found to occur in about one in 100 live births. FASD includes difficulties with language, poor impulse control, and problems in attention or judgment which can in turn affect success in school and all other areas of life. Unlike the effects of many other illicit drugs, the effects of in utero alcohol exposure are lifelong.

The risks to fetal development are greatest with heavy drinking while pregnant. However, researchers have not been able to establish a known safe level of alcohol use in pregnancy. This is not surprising given the many individual factors, such as nutrition, stress and exposure to violence and/or lack of prenatal support, that affect women's drinking and health.

Studies on the effects of low to moderate levels of alcohol exposure during pregnancy have been inconsistent. But, taken together, these studies suggest that even low to moderate alcohol use at any time during pregnancy may be associated with an increased risk of spontaneous abortion, and long term adverse outcomes, including slower growth during the first year of life and poorer cognitive and behavioural development. Therefore, it is safest not to drink any alcohol during pregnancy.

Women are also advised to either avoid drinking alcohol during the months they are breastfeeding or to breastfeed or pump breast milk before drinking alcohol. Alcohol consumed by the mother passes readily into her breast milk and can affect the infant. For example, there is some evidence to suggest that children feed less well if breast milk contains alcohol and that alcohol in breast milk can impair child development.

Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines state that

- the safest option during pregnancy, when planning to become pregnant or before breastfeeding is to not drink alcohol at all

According to the Canadian Maternity Experience Survey

- 11% of women reported ever drinking alcohol during their pregnancy (this figure excludes women who drank alcohol before they knew they were pregnant)

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