

Patient Article: Let's Talk About Alcohol and Pregnancy

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Let's Talk—Facts to Know About Alcohol and Pregnancy

It is easy to find conflicting information about alcohol use and pregnancy. You may hear different opinions from friends, family, the internet, books, and medical professionals. So, take a few minutes to learn the facts about the risks of alcohol use during pregnancy.

FACT: No safe level of alcohol during pregnancy has been established. The limited number of studies that promote the myth that light drinking during pregnancy is fine have not studied all the negative outcomes that can occur among people with fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASDs), have not focused on studying people with FASDs, or have not studied effects that may only be seen in individuals at older ages. CDC and major medical associations providing guidance to healthcare providers advise pregnant women to avoid alcohol completely because *no safe level of alcohol during pregnancy has been established*.

FACT: Alcohol use can harm a pregnancy at any point. Some people incorrectly say you can wait until you have a positive pregnancy test before limiting alcohol intake. In fact, alcohol use increases the risks of miscarriage and can negatively affect developing organs.¹ The safest thing you can do to protect your baby is to avoid any type of alcohol use, beginning when you start trying to get pregnant.

FACT: It is not possible to predict how exposure to alcohol during pregnancy will impact a particular baby. Some people may mistakenly conclude that alcohol does not affect any babies if they know a healthy baby who was exposed to alcohol during pregnancy. That is simply not true. In fact, even twins exposed to the same amount of alcohol before birth can have different health outcomes.² **While some babies may not be affected by alcohol during pregnancy, others may have lifelong effects.** The safest thing is to avoid any type of alcohol use throughout pregnancy.

FACT: FASDs are often not identified until children are older. People mistakenly believe you can always tell right away if a baby has been impacted by prenatal alcohol exposure. The truth is FASDs include a range of behavioral, intellectual, and physical disabilities that are rarely easy to identify in a newborn. Some FASD effects, such as learning difficulties, may not be evident until children are school age.

FACT: Drinking alcohol during pregnancy does not help you sleep better. Many people have bought into the myth that a glass of wine might help a pregnant woman sleep better. However, data show alcohol disrupts sleep. Drinking alcohol can negatively affect your sleep by causing you to wake earlier and have more sleep disturbances.³

High-quality health care includes your provider asking you about your alcohol use, giving you evidence-based information you can use to make informed choices about drinking, and taking the time to answer your questions. No safe level of alcohol during pregnancy has been established. Furthermore, every pregnancy is different. Some babies may not be affected, but others may have

lifelong effects. For these reasons, CDC and major medical associations providing guidance to healthcare providers advise pregnant women to avoid alcohol completely.

To get the most out of your health care

- *Choose a healthcare provider you feel comfortable with* and let them know it is important to you to take time to discuss your concerns.
- *Write down your questions* before your appointment and ask follow-up questions during the appointment. Take notes or ask for a copy of printed materials with your provider's recommendations.
- *Be open and honest about your alcohol use* with your provider. This is the only way they can provide you with accurate and high-quality care.
- *Consider what your health goals are as they relate to pregnancy* and communicate them clearly to your provider, so your provider can best support you in having a healthy pregnancy, if or when you want to.

The CDC website has information on alcohol use during pregnancy and FASDs, visit www.cdc.gov/fasd.

There are many studies and articles about alcohol and pregnancy for healthcare providers and the public. If you would like to dig into the evidence, it is available at

- <https://www.cdc.gov/alcohol-pregnancy/data-research/facts-stats/index.html>
- <https://fasdunited.org/alcohol-exposure-fasd-united/>
- <https://fasdunited.org/fasd-faqs/>
- <https://bit.ly/3XGkpOd>

References:

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CHOICES: Preventing Alcohol Exposed Pregnancies. <https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/31412>
2. Astley Hemingway, S. et al. Twin Study Confirms Virtually Identical Prenatal Alcohol Exposures Can Lead to Markedly Different Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder Outcomes—Fetal Genetics Influences Fetal Vulnerability. *Adv Pediatr Res*. 2018.
3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. NIOSH Training for Nurses on Shift Work and Long Work Hours. <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/work-hour-training-for-nurses/longhours/mod6/04.html>