



Pregnancy and alcohol



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Pregnancy and alcohol - What you need to know

Pregnancy is a time when many women want to know what they can do to keep themselves and their baby healthy. One of the best things you can do is to not drink alcohol while you are pregnant, and while you are trying to become pregnant.

This leaflet explains why **no amount of alcohol at any stage of pregnancy is safe.**

Why should I not drink alcohol during pregnancy?

Alcohol can damage your baby's developing brain and body. Alcohol passes from the mother's blood into the baby's blood via the placenta.

Drinking can cause brain damage and other birth defects. The more you drink, the greater the risk to your baby. Zero alcohol = zero risk of FASD for your baby.

What harm does alcohol do?

Drinking alcohol during pregnancy causes:

- foetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD), and
- foetal alcohol syndrome (FAS).

What problems does FASD cause?

Foetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) cause life-long problems with a baby's body, brain and development which can create problems for them as children and later as adults.

For example:

- Hyperactivity and poor attention
- Learning difficulties and a lower IQ
- Difficulty controlling behaviour

- Difficulty getting along with other people
- Being smaller than expected
- Problems with eating and sleeping
- Emotional and mental health problems

What is FAS?

Foetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) is more serious and can happen when you drink heavily during your pregnancy. In addition to all the signs of FASD listed above, your baby may:

- be smaller than normal or underweight, have damage to their brain and spinal cord;
- have an abnormally small head or eyes, abnormally-shaped ears or facial features, and problems with the heart and other body organs.

Can FAS and FASD be cured?

Sadly, there is no cure. FASD and FAS can cause problems throughout a person's life. Diagnosing and treating the symptoms early can help a child to manage better.

Why are some babies affected and not others?

Various factors can influence how babies are affected by a woman's alcohol consumption.

These factors include:

- How much alcohol you drink – the more you drink, the greater the risk;
- How often you drink alcohol;
- When you drink during pregnancy (which week);
- How your body absorbs and breaks down the alcohol.

However, the evidence is clear; **no amount of alcohol at any stage of pregnancy is safe.**

Will the occasional drink do any harm?

No amount of alcohol is safe. There is no proven level of safe drinking during pregnancy, but heavy or frequent drinking is more dangerous.

No amount of alcohol at any stage of pregnancy is safe

Drinking, especially heavy drinking during the first three months of pregnancy is particularly harmful. This is the time when your baby's body organs (heart, lungs, kidneys, and so on) and facial features are developing. The brain develops throughout the whole of pregnancy.

What should I do if I have already drunk alcohol during my pregnancy?

- Stop drinking alcohol for the rest of your pregnancy. The less your baby is exposed to alcohol over the course of the pregnancy, the greater their chance for healthy brain growth and development.
- If you drink regularly and you find it hard to stop, ask for support and help. You may be reluctant to speak about your drinking but do talk to your GP, midwife or obstetrician. You can also call the HSE Alcohol and Drugs Helpline on **1800 459 459** and speak in confidence with a qualified professional about your drinking. These professionals will be happy to help and support you.

What should I do if I'm planning a family?

Some women drink alcohol before they know they are pregnant. If you are planning to become pregnant, giving up alcohol while you are trying to conceive (get pregnant) as well as during the pregnancy will avoid any possible risk to your baby.

How can I plan an alcohol-free pregnancy?

Some women find it hard to give up alcohol for nine months (and for the time of planning to become pregnant), especially if they drink regularly or everyone around them is drinking. You may feel under pressure to drink because other people expect you to or because you don't want people to guess that you're pregnant.

- Plan ahead how you will manage temptation and pressure to drink from other people.
- Explain your reasons for not drinking to your partner, friends and family and ask them to support you. You could show them this leaflet to help them understand why you want to stay away from alcohol.
- If a lot of your time was previously spent socialising and drinking, look for new hobbies you will enjoy or meet your friends at a café rather than a bar.

For more advice, support or tips for an alcohol-free pregnancy or reducing your alcohol intake, visit

www.askaboutalcohol.ie



How partners, friends and family can help

- **Reduce your drinking or give up for a time**

If your partner or loved one is pregnant, avoiding alcohol can be a great way to support her and make it easier for her to stay alcohol-free. Find new routines and activities so you can spend time together away from alcohol.

- **Avoid pressure**

Never pressurise someone into taking a drink or make a comment about someone refusing a drink. In our drinking culture, it can be hard for women to resist this pressure, especially if they aren't ready to tell people about their pregnancy.

- **Make social events easier**

If you're hosting a social event, have a variety of alcohol-free drinks available, and be discreet in the way you offer drinks to avoid people commenting on a choice of drink.

- **Be supportive**

While being pregnant is a great reason to make healthy lifestyle choices, it's not always easy. Avoid criticising if your loved one finds it hard and instead focus on trying to find practical ways to help.

Everyone has a role to play in helping a woman to make healthy choices.

Visit **www.askaboutalcohol.ie** for more information about alcohol and pregnancy and to find details of support services.

If you are pregnant and are finding it difficult to stop drinking please contact your GP or the confidential HSE Drug & Alcohol Helpline for local help and support.

Phone: 1800 459 459, Monday to Friday from 9.30am to 5.30pm

Email: helpline@hse.ie

Visit: www.drugs.ie for information on other drugs and how they may affect pregnancy.



Families and communities can support women to have an alcohol-free pregnancy.

Visit **askaboutalcohol.ie** for more information about alcohol and pregnancy, further information leaflets and to find details of support services.

If you are concerned about your drinking, contact the confidential HSE Alcohol and Drugs Helpline for information and support services.

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or email **helpline@hse.ie**

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