

# ALCOHOL AND PREGNANCY



THE SOCIETY OF  
OBSTETRICIANS AND  
GYNAECOLOGISTS  
OF CANADA

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**If you are pregnant or trying to conceive, you can discuss alcohol consumption with your health-care professional; this is a routine part of women's health care.**

All women have to make lifestyle changes during pregnancy or when they are planning to become pregnant. Sometimes this may mean adapting an exercise routine, resting more or eating healthier foods. It may also mean changing your pattern of alcohol consumption. These types of changes, along with regular prenatal care, can help you have a healthy pregnancy — and a healthy baby.

## Just one drink... is it okay?

We just don't know. There isn't enough evidence to know how much harm small amounts of alcohol during pregnancy may cause your baby. For this reason, abstinence is the safest choice if you are pregnant.

For the health of your baby, it's never too late to reduce the amount of alcohol you consume or to stop drinking.

## How common is alcohol use in pregnancy?

The majority of Canadian women drink alcohol. Nearly 77 per cent of women over the age of 15 have had at least one drink of alcohol within the last year, and 33 per cent report drinking at least once a week. Though drinking can be problematic for some who experience alcohol abuse or dependence, this is a safe and enjoyable practice for many women.

However, the nature and potential severity of problems increase when alcohol is consumed during pregnancy. Between 10 and 15 per cent of women report drinking during pregnancy, and over 62 per cent of women report drinking alcohol during the three months prior to pregnancy.

## Why does my doctor ask about alcohol consumption?

This is a routine part of women's health care. Universal screening for alcohol consumption is recommended for all pregnant women and women of child-bearing age. Your health-care professional is trained to ask these questions, and can provide guidance on whether your level of drinking puts you or your baby at risk of adverse effects.

## How does alcohol affect my unborn baby?

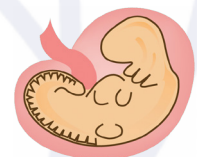
When you are pregnant, anything you eat or drink can affect your baby. Alcohol that you consume quickly reaches your baby and can affect him or her for longer than it affects you. **Even from the very start of your pregnancy, alcohol can have serious and permanent consequences.**

Evidence shows that when a pregnant woman consumes alcohol at high-risk levels or binge drinks, her baby is at risk of developmental abnormalities. These effects of alcohol exposure while in the womb are called *fetal alcohol spectrum disorder* (FASD). FASD is estimated to affect one per cent of the Canadian population.

FASD is an umbrella term that refers to the range of harms that may be caused by prenatal exposure to alcohol:

- Fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS)
- Partial fetal alcohol syndrome (pFAS)
- Alcohol related neurodevelopmental disorder (ARND)

These conditions cause restricted growth, facial abnormalities and central nervous system dysfunction (permanent brain damage). Children, teens and adults with FASD may struggle with depression and anxiety, and experience difficulties with social interactions and relationships, as well as other aspects of their lives.



**What is high-risk drinking?** There is not enough evidence to define any safe threshold for alcohol consumption. If you drink, your baby is at risk.

**What is binge drinking?** Consumption of alcohol that brings your blood alcohol level to 0.08 per cent — for a woman of average weight, this usually means drinking four or more drinks in about two hours.



## Alcohol content of drinks

Any type of alcohol can harm your baby – beer, coolers, wine or hard liquor. Some of these drinks have higher alcohol content per volume than others. What matters is the amount of alcohol you consume and how often you have it, rather than the type of drink. Binge drinking or drinking at high-risk levels can be particularly harmful for an unborn baby.

## I didn't know I was pregnant... what should I do?

Many pregnancies are not planned; having a small amount of alcohol before you knew you were pregnant is unlikely to harm your baby.

Nevertheless, if you are trying to become pregnant or think you could become pregnant, you may need to consider changing your alcohol consumption patterns. It is particularly important to avoid binge drinking. Speak with your health-care professional about this.

## Where to turn if you need support to change your habits

Alcohol abuse or dependency may make it more difficult for you to change your drinking habits if you become pregnant, even if you really want to make changes. Signs of alcohol abuse or dependency include a pattern of drinking which results in harm to your health, interpersonal relationships or ability to work or go about your daily life.

It's never too late to reduce the risks for your baby. If you are having difficulty controlling your drinking, speak with your health-care professional or call the free, anonymous Motherisk Alcohol and Substance Use Helpline at 1-877-327-4636.



## Alcohol and breastfeeding

Alcohol freely distributes into milk and will be ingested by nursing infants. Low-level, occasional alcohol consumption is not likely to pose a problem to an infant, but heavy alcohol consumption or binge drinking should be avoided. Ideally, nursing should be withheld temporarily after alcohol consumption; at least two hours per drink to avoid unnecessary infant exposure. Side effects reported in infants include sedation and impairment of motor skills.

## Further resources on alcohol in pregnancy

- The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada's *Alcohol Use in Pregnancy Consensus Clinical Guideline*: [www.sogc.org/guidelines](http://www.sogc.org/guidelines)
- The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada's public education brochures available at [www.sogc.org](http://www.sogc.org):
  - Medications and Drugs: Before and During Pregnancy
  - Medications and Drugs While Breastfeeding
- The **Motherisk** program of the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto is a recognized leader for information about medications in pregnancy and breastfeeding. You may talk to the team at Motherisk by calling the toll-free number 1-877-439-2744 or visiting [www.motherisk.org](http://www.motherisk.org).

*The consensus clinical practice guideline "Alcohol use and pregnancy" is endorsed by the Canadian Association of Midwives, the Canadian Association of Perinatal, Women's Health and Neonatal Nurses; the College of Family Physicians of Canada; the Society of Rural Physicians of Canada; Motherisk; the Federation of Medical Women of Canada; the Association of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Quebec; and the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada.*