

## Frequently asked questions

# Alcohol and pregnancy

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### Why shouldn't you drink alcohol when you're pregnant?

When you drink, so does your baby. Alcohol in the mother's blood is carried through the placenta to the baby. Alcohol can change the structure and function of a baby's developing organs, especially the brain. The child is then at risk of lifelong physical, behavioural and learning disabilities. Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) is the term used to describe these effects. Drinking alcohol during pregnancy is also linked to miscarriage, stillbirth, premature birth and reduced birthweight.

### Will the placenta protect the baby from alcohol?

No. Alcohol passes freely through the placenta from the mother's blood and can reach levels in the baby's blood that are as high as those in the mother.

### Can I drink at all?

There is no known safe level of alcohol use during pregnancy. Even a small amount of alcohol at any time during pregnancy can affect a baby's development. It does not matter whether it is beer, cider, wine, spirits or ready-to-drink spirits (RTDs) – they all contain alcohol.

### Is there a safe time to drink during pregnancy?

No. Alcohol can harm a developing baby at any time during pregnancy. It can cause problems from the early weeks, before a woman even knows she is pregnant, through to the end of pregnancy.

### What if I'm pregnant and have been drinking alcohol?

If you are pregnant and have been drinking alcohol, it is never too late to stop. If you are concerned, talk to your midwife, doctor, or another health professional.

### What are the New Zealand guidelines about alcohol and pregnancy?

The advice from the Ministry of Health, the Health Promotion Agency and other health sector agencies is to *stop drinking alcohol if you could be pregnant, are pregnant or are trying to get pregnant. There is no known safe level of alcohol consumption during pregnancy.*<sup>1</sup>

## What is FASD?

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) is a term used to describe the different effects that can occur in a child when a woman drinks alcohol during pregnancy. Some children affected by fetal alcohol exposure have distinct facial features, poor growth and abnormalities of the brain and its functions. Other children with FASD may not look different but still experience significant difficulties with behaviour, learning and development caused by damage to the brain from alcohol. Sometimes these difficulties do not become apparent or recognised until school age.

## How do you get FASD?

FASD can only be caused by a mother drinking alcohol during pregnancy. The brain and central nervous systems of the developing baby continue to grow throughout pregnancy and can be affected by alcohol at all stages of pregnancy.

## Isn't FASD caused by binge drinking?

The risk of developing FASD depends on the pattern and timing of when alcohol is drunk. Harm to the baby is more likely to occur with frequent heavy drinking. However, some studies have found associations between lower amounts of alcohol and a baby's development. For women who might be pregnant, are pregnant or are planning a pregnancy, not drinking at all is the safest option.

## Can FASD be cured or will it go away as the child gets older?

No. The effects of fetal alcohol exposure are permanent. The effects of fetal alcohol exposure are often not obvious at birth.

## How many people in New Zealand have FASD?

Not everyone who drinks alcohol in pregnancy has a baby with FASD. International statistics suggest that 1% to 5% of live births each year will be FASD affected. In New Zealand it is estimated that between 600 and 3,000 babies are born every year with FASD.<sup>2</sup>

## How can FASD be prevented?

FASD can be prevented by not drinking any alcohol if you are pregnant or planning to get pregnant. If you are pregnant and have been drinking alcohol, the best thing you can do is stop drinking right now.



If you are finding it difficult to stop drinking, talk to your midwife, doctor, another health professional or contact the Alcohol Drug Helpline:

**0800 787 797**

**[alcoholdrughelp.org.nz](http://alcoholdrughelp.org.nz)**

**or free text to 234.**

<sup>2</sup> Sellman, D. and Connor, J. (2009). In utero brain damage from alcohol: a preventable tragedy. *NZMJ* 122(1306):6