ALCOHOL AND PREGNANCY – FAQS

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 and can reach levels in the baby’s blood that are as high as those in the mother.

Drinking alcohol during pregnancy has been linked to miscarriage, stillbirth, premature birth and reduced birthweight. Depending on the pattern and timing of alcohol consumption, lifelong mental, physical, behavioural and learning disabilities are also a risk for the child. Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) is the term used to describe the range of effects that can occur.

Are there New Zealand guidelines about alcohol and pregnancy?

Yes, 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.¹ There is no known safe level of alcohol consumption during pregnancy.

Can I drink at all?

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

Research shows that harm 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.

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.

¹ alcoholpregnancy.org.nz
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 of pregnancy, 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. Stopping drinking at any time during pregnancy is best for your baby.

If you are concerned talk to your midwife, doctor, or another health professional.

What is FASD?

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) is an umbrella term used to describe the different effects that can occur in a developing baby when a woman drinks alcohol during pregnancy. These effects may include physical, mental, behavioural and learning disabilities that last a lifetime.

How do you get FASD?

FASD can only be caused by a mother drinking alcohol during pregnancy. FASD is 100% preventable. Alcohol can pass through the placenta and change the structure and function of a baby’s developing organs. The brain and central nervous systems, which continue to grow throughout pregnancy, can be affected by alcohol at all stages of pregnancy.

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

No. The effects of fetal alcohol exposure are permanent. Alcohol during pregnancy causes changes to occur in the underlying cell structures of the brain and other organs that affect an individual’s ability to function normally.

The effects of fetal alcohol exposure are often not obvious at birth. Some children affected by fetal alcohol exposure may be identified by abnormal facial features, poor growth and abnormalities of the brain and its functions. Some children with a FASD may not look different to other children but will experience significant difficulties with behaviour, learning and development caused by damage to the brain from alcohol.

How many people in New Zealand have FASD?

Not all babies exposed to alcohol before birth will have 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.²

How can FASD be prevented?

FASD can be prevented by not drinking any alcohol if you are pregnant.

If drinking in the early stages of pregnancy has occurred, then stopping drinking immediately will reduce the possibility of FASD. 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 or free text adh to 234).

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