

Alcohol and Pregnancy

Many people think alcohol is a stimulant, because it lowers inhibitions and impairs planning and judgment. However, alcohol actually acts as a depressant, slowing down the central nervous system and brain functioning. High alcohol consumption is linked to increased risk of clinical depression and anxiety symptoms for women who have given birth. However, the nature of these risks may change as a woman gets older.

Effects on women's health

Generally, the same amount of alcohol affects women more than it does men. Women are more sensitive to the effects of alcohol than men are, and women experience its harmful medical complications in a shorter period of time. For example, women tend to develop liver disease, heart disease and decreased brain volume after fewer years of heavy drinking. Women who consume as few as two drinks per day have a greater risk of developing high blood pressure, liver disease, cancer and even stroke.

Effects during conception

Emerging evidence from recent studies suggests that the father's drinking before conception and at the time of conception may also have adverse effects on fetal development. It has been established that drinking while pregnant harms the developing fetus. Much research is being done, but to date, there is still no known safe level of alcohol consumption for pregnant women. A growing infant is exposed to alcohol that is passed from the mother through the placenta. Because the liver of a baby is underdeveloped, it cannot break down the alcohol as quickly or as adequately as a fully developed liver can. As a result, the child is exposed to alcohol for longer periods of time, and developing organs may be harmed by this long-term exposure. Any harm done to the preborn as a result of drinking during pregnancy cannot be reversed, but eliminating alcohol intake at any time during pregnancy is healthiest for the baby. It is never too late to quit.

Effects during birth

Pregnant women, who consume as little as one drink per day, are at higher risk of premature labour and delivery than women who rarely drink. Use of alcohol during pregnancy has been related to miscarriage and stillbirth. Even one drink per day is associated with slower fetal growth and lower birth weight.

Effects on child development

Early development

The short-term effects of maternal drinking during pregnancy on newborns may include withdrawal symptoms such as sleeplessness, irritability, diarrhea, vomiting, breathing problems,

seizures and lack of sucking during breastfeeding. Even modest alcohol use during pregnancy has been linked to developmental and behavioral difficulties in infants.

Long-term development

There are many terms used to describe the physical and mental difficulties a child exposed to alcohol before birth may experience. **These difficulties are permanent and do not go away or change; they last an entire lifetime.** Prenatal alcohol exposure, particularly binge drinking, is linked to some psychiatric disorders and symptoms in early adulthood.

Children exposed to alcohol before birth may have intellectual, behavioral, emotional or social problems that persist throughout their entire lives. These children may have

- Mental difficulties
- Problems with attentions span, learning, memory, problem solving and reading
- Poor judgment or failure to consider consequences
- Destructive, aggressive, inattentive, nervous or overactive behavior
- Trouble with the law
- A tendency to develop their own alcohol or other drug problem

Physically, alcohol-exposed children may exhibit problems with co-ordination, movement, vision and hearing, and may have birth defects that include

- Bone and muscle deformities
- Heart defects
- Other deformities of the face or head
- Kidney and organ problems

Remember, you only have one opportunity to give your developing baby the very best that you can give. When alcohol is consumed, the risk is heightened considerably. That child should have the same developmental advantages as any other child. However, when the mother chooses to drink while carrying her baby, she deprives him or her of the typical level of development expected, not just for the first or second year of their life, but for the entire life of that child. Remember, no amount of alcohol is safe for a developing baby.