HEALTH BASICS

Alcohol and pregnancy

This explains how drinking alcohol during pregnancy can affect fetal development and what to do after an exposure.

WHAT IT IS
Guidance about alcohol exposure before and during pregnancy

WHERE IT COMES UP
Pregnancy planning, prenatal visits, drinks, medicines, and food labels

WHY IT MATTERS
Alcohol can affect fetal growth and brain development

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease or diagnosis

WHO TO ASK
Midwife, obstetric clinician, family doctor, or alcohol support service

HOW IT IS CHECKED
No prenatal test can rule out alcohol-related effects

Overview

Alcohol and pregnancy refers to the health effects and practical questions linked with drinking alcohol before or during pregnancy. It is not a disease or a diagnosis.

Alcohol includes beer, wine, cider, spirits, cocktails, and drinks mixed with alcohol. The type of drink does not make the alcohol safer for fetal development.

Health authorities advise avoiding alcohol during pregnancy. No amount, type, or timing has been shown to be safe. The risk generally rises with greater or more frequent exposure, but it is not possible to predict the effect of a particular drink in an individual pregnancy.

Many people drink before realizing they are pregnant. If this happened to you, it does not mean that harm has occurred. Stop drinking when you learn you are pregnant and discuss the exposure honestly with your prenatal clinician. They can review the circumstances without judgment and arrange usual pregnancy care.

Avoiding alcohol is also advised when trying to become pregnant because early development begins before a pregnancy test may become positive.

How it works

When you drink, alcohol enters your bloodstream. It crosses the placenta, the organ that supplies oxygen and nutrients to the fetus. This means the fetus is exposed to alcohol as well.

A developing fetus cannot process alcohol as efficiently as an adult. Alcohol can interfere with how cells grow, move, and form connections. The brain develops throughout pregnancy, so there is no stage when alcohol exposure is known to be risk-free.

The possible effect is influenced by several factors. These include how much alcohol was consumed, how often, the stage of pregnancy, whether several drinks were consumed close together, and individual biological factors. These details cannot be used to calculate an exact outcome.

Alcohol exposure cannot be judged from how intoxicated someone felt. Drink sizes and alcohol strength also differ. A large glass, strong beer, or generously poured spirit may contain more alcohol than expected.

There is no routine blood test, ultrasound, or genetic test that can confirm that a fetus has been unaffected by alcohol. Ultrasound can assess growth and some aspects of anatomy, but a normal scan cannot rule out later problems with learning, behaviour, or development.

Why it matters for your health

Alcohol exposure during pregnancy may affect fetal growth and the developing brain. It is also associated with pregnancy complications, including miscarriage, stillbirth, premature birth, and restricted growth. An association does not mean that every exposure causes one of these outcomes.

Exposure can sometimes lead to fetal alcohol spectrum disorders, or FASD. This is an umbrella term for conditions linked with prenatal alcohol exposure. They can affect learning, attention, memory, behaviour, coordination, communication, and everyday functioning.

Fetal alcohol syndrome is one diagnosis within this spectrum. It can involve a particular combination of growth, facial, and brain-related findings. Not everyone with an alcohol-related condition has these facial features.

FASD is generally assessed after birth. The assessment may include developmental testing, a physical examination, medical and school records, and a history of prenatal alcohol exposure. There is no single test that diagnoses every case.

Alcohol may also affect the pregnant person directly. Intoxication can contribute to falls, injuries, unsafe driving, poor nutrition, or taking other substances unintentionally. Regular

heavy drinking can lead to alcohol dependence, also called alcohol use disorder.

What can go wrong

The main situations linked with alcohol and pregnancy include:

Alcohol withdrawal can be medically serious. If you drink heavily or regularly, have had withdrawal before, or feel unable to stop, seek medical advice promptly rather than trying to manage it alone. Treatment and support can be adapted for pregnancy.

Call emergency services if someone is difficult to wake, has slow or irregular breathing, has a seizure, collapses, develops severe confusion, or may have alcohol poisoning. Place an unconscious but breathing person on their side and do not leave them alone.

A past exposure without current illness is usually not an emergency. It can normally be discussed at your next prenatal appointment. Contact your maternity service sooner if the exposure was ongoing, you are worried about dependence, or you need help stopping.

- Pregnancy loss: Alcohol use is associated with miscarriage and stillbirth, although an individual cause often cannot be identified.
- Premature birth or restricted growth: A baby may be born early or may not grow as expected.
- Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders: These are developmental conditions caused by prenatal alcohol exposure.
- Alcohol poisoning: A dangerously high alcohol level can suppress breathing and consciousness.
- Alcohol withdrawal: Someone whose body has become dependent on alcohol can develop shaking, sweating, vomiting, agitation, hallucinations, confusion, or seizures after stopping.

What you can do

If you are pregnant or trying to become pregnant, the safest action is not to drink alcohol. There is no need to replace alcohol with a special supplement or detox product.

If you drank before knowing you were pregnant, stop now. Make a brief record of what you remember, including the approximate dates, drink types, amounts, and whether several drinks were consumed together. An estimate is useful; you do not need a perfect count.

Tell your midwife, obstetric clinician, or family doctor. This information helps them understand

the exposure and support you. It should not replace routine prenatal care, and extra scans cannot guarantee that alcohol-related effects will be detected.

Check drink labels for alcohol by volume, often written as "ABV." Products described as low-alcohol or alcohol-free may contain small amounts, depending on the product and local labelling rules. A product labelled 0.0% ABV is the clearest alcohol-free option.

Food cooked with alcohol may retain some alcohol, depending on how much was added and how it was prepared. If avoiding it matters to you, ask how the food was made or choose a dish without alcohol.

Do not stop a prescribed medicine simply because it contains alcohol or because its label mentions pregnancy. Ask a pharmacist or prescribing clinician to check the product and, if needed, suggest an alternative.

If avoiding alcohol is difficult, ask directly for support. Prenatal clinicians, primary care services, and specialist alcohol services can offer confidential assessment and treatment. If your body may be dependent on alcohol, medical supervision is important because sudden withdrawal can be dangerous.

Common questions

I had one drink before I knew I was pregnant. What does that mean?

A single exposure does not establish that harm occurred. No test can calculate its effect with certainty. Stop drinking and mention it during routine prenatal care so the situation can be reviewed in context.

Is wine safer than spirits?

No. The relevant substance is alcohol, regardless of whether it comes from wine, beer, cider, spirits, or a cocktail. Strength and serving size determine how much alcohol a drink contains.

Is there a safe stage of pregnancy for drinking?

No stage has been shown to be safe. Different organs develop at different times, and the brain continues developing throughout pregnancy.

Can an ultrasound show whether alcohol caused harm?

Ultrasound can check fetal growth and some structural development. It cannot rule out FASD or predict later learning, attention, behaviour, and memory.

Should I ask for extra tests after drinking alcohol?

There is no specific prenatal test that can rule out alcohol-related effects. Your clinician can decide whether any monitoring is appropriate based on the exposure and the rest of your

pregnancy care. For many brief past exposures, routine follow-up is all that is needed.

What if my partner drinks?

A partner's drinking does not expose the fetus through the placenta. However, keeping alcohol out of the home or agreeing not to drink together may make avoiding it easier. Smoke, violence, unsafe driving, or other risks related to another person's drinking need separate support.

Sources

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. About Alcohol Use During Pregnancy
- National Health Service. Drinking alcohol while pregnant
- Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. Alcohol and pregnancy
- World Health Organization. Guidelines for the identification and management of substance use and substance use disorders in pregnancy
- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. Fetal Alcohol Exposure