



Pick Your Path to Health

Pregnancy and Alcohol

There is a lot of advice that pregnant women receive. When to tell coworkers you're pregnant, how to sleep comfortably when your belly gets big, how to pick a baby name—the list goes on and on. But the advice that all pregnant women should take serious notice of is this: *don't drink while you're pregnant.*

"We know that it's possible to harm a baby by consuming too much alcohol," says Deanne Williams, Executive Director of the American College of Nurse-Midwives in Washington, D.C. "The problem is we don't know how much is harmful."

What is known, however, is that the fetus consumes everything the mom consumes. If mom has a glass of wine, so does the unborn child. If mom indulges in a happy hour beer, baby does the same. And because alcohol affects each person differently, determining how much alcohol is safe and how much is harmful is a guessing game.

"The best advice is not to drink while you're pregnant," emphasizes Williams.

Consequences

"Early exposure [to alcohol] presents the greatest risk for serious physical defects, and later exposure increases the chances of neurological and growth deficiencies or miscarriage," according to The Arc, the leading national organization on mental retardation.

The problems associated with prenatal use are varied. Heavy alcohol use by pregnant women puts their babies at risk for fetal alcohol effects (FAE) or the most severe fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS). Children born with FAE or FAS may have permanent defects such as mental retardation, developmental delays, learning disabilities, muscle problems, heart and kidney defects, small head size, and many other abnormalities affecting their growth and nervous system.

Other research published by the Ohio State University Extension Office shows that mothers who consume two to three drinks per day have children born at lower birth weights and with some physical defects.

Children of mother who consume one or two drinks per day during pregnancy may experience life-long behavioral and learning problems.

Prenatal Care

Delaying prenatal care and continuing to drink is a bad combination. According to *Prenatal Care in the United States*, a report published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, African American women are more likely to delay prenatal care to the second or third trimester or to receive no prenatal care. Seeking early prenatal care is crucial says the report.

"It provides the opportunity for encouraging healthy behaviors and prevents disease by educating women early in their pregnancies about proper nutrition, adequate weight gain, safe sexual practices, dangers of smoking, alcohol, and drugs...and other factors that might affect pregnancy outcome."

Getting Help

And if you are pregnant and have a drinking problem?

"Women who have a serious drinking problem need a support system to help them," Williams advises.

Some tips to help you and your unborn child get a healthy start:

- Inform your care provider of your drinking habits right away and don't withhold any information.
- Enroll in a program if you've tried giving up drinking and need help accomplishing your goal.
- Ask your partner or family members not to drink when you are around to avoid temptation. Also ask them for positive reinforcement to abstain from drinking.
- Minimize, if possible, any stress that leads you to consume alcohol.
- Abstain from alcohol if you're planning to become pregnant.

For more information

If you would like to learn more about how your baby is developing, read *What To Expect When You're Expecting* (Revised Edition) by Arlene Eisenberg, Sandee E. Hathaway, and Heidi E. Murkoff.

The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists offers a patient education pamphlet # AP132 on alcohol and pregnancy. For a free copy, send a SASE envelope to ACOG 409 12th Street, SW, P.O. Box 96920, Washington, D.C., 20090-6920, or you may request it via e-mail by writing to pvanhine@acog.org.

One thing remains true: pregnancy is a special time in a woman's life. Although it is a time of many challenges, the smart choices you make will help you deliver a healthy baby. Prevention is the best path to a healthy baby and healthy you.

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov/> To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."