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Alcohol and Pregnancy

This sheet talks about the risks that exposure to alcohol can have during pregnancy. With each pregnancy, all women have a 3% to 5% chance of having a baby with a birth defect. This information should not take the place of medical care and advice from your health care provider.

What is alcohol?

Alcohol is the ingredient that gives beer, wine, or hard liquor its intoxicating (“high”) effect. This fact sheet will focus on the effects of recreational alcohol exposure during pregnancy. The same amount of alcohol is found in a standard serving of beer, wine, or hard liquor. A standard serving is considered to be 12 ounces of beer, 4-5 ounces of wine, or 1.5 ounces of hard liquor.

Is there a safe amount of alcohol I can drink during pregnancy?

No, there is no safe level of alcohol established during pregnancy.

Alcohol crosses the placenta easily, but differences in genetics and metabolism of alcohol by both the mother and the developing baby may result in a wide range of risk. The risk may be different even in the same mother in different pregnancies.

Can drinking alcohol make it harder for me to get pregnant?

Some studies have shown an increase in fertility problems among women with heavy alcohol exposure. It is best to avoid alcohol while trying to get pregnant.

Can drinking alcohol cause a miscarriage?

Some studies have found higher rates of miscarriage and stillbirth with alcohol use during pregnancy.

Can drinking alcohol during my pregnancy cause a birth defect?

Yes! Drinking alcohol during pregnancy is a leading cause of mental retardation. When a mother uses alcohol in large amounts and/or regularly during pregnancy, her baby is at risk for Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS). The features of FAS include a pattern of certain birth defects that include small head and body size, specific facial features, and learning and behavioral problems. FAS is the most severe

outcome of alcohol use during pregnancy. When a child has some but not all of the findings of FAS, doctors may use another term, such as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).

The risks from heavy alcohol use and daily alcohol use have been well established. The risks from infrequent binge drinking (5 or more standard drinks at one sitting) are less clear. The risks for occasional use of lower amounts of alcohol are also not clear.

Are there long term issues with FASD?

Yes. FASD is associated with lifelong challenges, such as difficulties with learning and memory. Individuals with FASD are more likely to have difficulty understanding the consequences of their actions, have poor judgment, and difficulty with social relationships. Higher rates of dropping out of school, mental health problems, and alcohol or drug abuse have also been reported in individuals with FASD.

I just found out I am 6 weeks pregnant and last weekend I had one beer. Will my baby have FASD?

While there is no known safe amount of alcohol, a single drink is unlikely to cause a problem. The best thing you can do for your baby is to avoid further use of alcohol during your pregnancy.

Is binge drinking on only some days of the week as risky as drinking alcohol everyday but at lower amounts?

Possibly but it is not clear. Binge drinking provides the highest alcohol dose to the developing baby at one time. However, studies on alcohol use during pregnancy often calculate weekly averages, so the effects of certain patterns of drinking alcohol are not well studied.

Is it ok to drink after the first trimester?

No! Alcohol has a direct effect on brain development. The brain develops throughout the whole pregnancy. This means drinking any time in

pregnancy increases the risk for having alcohol related brain damage. Therefore, there is no safe period to drink during pregnancy.

Can a baby go through withdrawal after birth?

Yes, if the mother has been drinking close to delivery. There are reports of withdrawal symptoms in infants whose mothers consumed alcohol near delivery. Symptoms included tremors, increased muscle tone, restlessness and excessive crying.

How will I know if alcohol has hurt my baby?

If you or others are concerned about your alcohol intake, it is important to discuss this with your doctor. A detailed ultrasound may be offered to you to look for birth defects. Usually, an ultrasound cannot see whether alcohol has affected the baby's brain. However, one of the signs of FASD is decreased growth, which can be evaluated on an ultrasound.

Once your baby is born, it is also recommended you tell your pediatrician about your alcohol use during pregnancy. Your baby can be evaluated for effects of alcohol exposure. Services and support are available for children with alcohol related problems.

Is there any hope for a baby who has been exposed to alcohol throughout pregnancy?

Yes. It is always recommended for a pregnant woman to stop her alcohol use, regardless of how far along in her pregnancy she is. The baby will benefit by no longer being exposed to alcohol. Though FASD cannot be cured, children with FASD benefit from early diagnosis. The best outcomes occur when these children are diagnosed early and receive appropriate support and assistance. Being raised in a stable and nurturing home where basic living and social skills can be taught leads to better outcomes for children with FASD.

Can I drink alcohol while breastfeeding?

Alcohol passes into the breast milk. The concentration of alcohol in the breast milk is close to the concentration of alcohol in the woman's bloodstream. Alcohol can pass back and forth from the bloodstream into the breast milk. Only time can reduce the amount of alcohol in the breast milk. It takes about 2 to 2.5 hours for each standard drink to clear from breast milk. For each additional drink, a woman must wait another 2-2.5 hours per drink. Alcohol may reduce the amount of milk you produce.

Effects on the infant from alcohol in the breast milk are not well studied but there have been reports of reduced infant feeding and changes in infant sleep patterns. Impaired motor development following exposure to alcohol in the breast milk was seen in one study but not another.

Since breastfeeding has documented benefits for the baby, speak with your pediatrician about your specific alcohol intake before avoiding breastfeeding.

What if the father of the baby drinks alcohol?

There is no evidence to suggest that a father's exposure to alcohol causes birth defects. In general, exposures that the father has do not increase risk to a pregnancy because the father does not share a blood connection with the developing baby. Studies have shown that hormone levels, sexual desire and sperm quality are reduced among men who are dependent on alcohol. For more information, please see the OTIS fact sheet [Paternal Exposures and Pregnancy](#).

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*If you have questions about the information on this fact sheet or other exposures during pregnancy, call **OTIS at 1-866-626-6847**.*