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# Alcohol & Pregnancy

## A Pocket Guide



Health and  
Social Care





Think before  
you drink

# Alcohol & Pregnancy

This guide is for you if you think you might be pregnant now or in the future.

It is aimed at answering some of the questions you may have about alcohol and pregnancy. It will guide you to make healthier choices.



## Can I drink alcohol when I'm pregnant?

**The safest approach in pregnancy is to choose not to drink at all.**

It is important to be aware that when you drink alcohol, your baby also drinks.

The risk of damage to your baby's physical and mental development increases the more you drink and binge drinking is especially harmful. This risk relates to a range of conditions including Foetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) and Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD).

## What if I have been drinking alcohol before I knew I was pregnant?

**Please be reassured** that if you have drunk small amounts of alcohol in the early stages of pregnancy there is very little risk of harm to your baby. A single episode of 'binge drinking'\* around the time of conception is less likely to be harmful to the mother or her baby.

It is important, however, to be aware that drinking heavily or 'binge drinking'\* in early pregnancy can be harmful to the foetus and there is an increased risk of early miscarriage.

Some women may be unaware of their pregnancy for several weeks or months. If there is any chance you may be pregnant, avoid drinking alcohol until you are sure you are not pregnant.

Pregnant mums should always consult with their health professional if they have any concerns about their alcohol intake.

\*Binge drinking definition: **Republic of Ireland:** 5 standard drinks for women (1 standard drink in the Republic of Ireland = 10 grams of alcohol).  
**UK** = 6 units of alcohol (1 unit of alcohol in the UK = 8 grams of alcohol).

## How does alcohol affect the unborn baby?

Alcohol is a toxic substance. It takes a woman's liver 1½ hours (approx) to break down 1 unit of alcohol/standard drink. However, in pregnancy, the alcohol passes from the mum's bloodstream through the placenta and into the baby's bloodstream. The placenta is not a filter. The unborn baby does not have a developed liver to process alcohol.

Drinking alcohol can affect:

- the baby's development in the womb;
- the baby's health at birth and increases the risk of Foetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) or Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD);
- the baby's long term physical and mental health; and
- the child's ability to learn (learning difficulties).

## What does FAS/FASD mean?

Most women are aware of **Foetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS)**. Children born with FAS can have growth problems, facial defects and lifelong learning and behaviour problems.

**Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD)** describes the range of less obvious effects or 'sleeping symptoms' that can be mild to severe and relate to one or more of the following range of symptoms:

- Be born small
- Have problems eating and sleeping
- Have problems seeing and hearing
- Have trouble following directions and learning to do simple things
- Have trouble paying attention and learning in school
- Have trouble getting along with others and controlling their behaviour
- May need medical care all their lives
- May need special educational support



**Remember FAS and FASD are 100% preventable by not drinking alcohol during your pregnancy.**



# Tips to take care of you and your baby during your pregnancy.

Talk to your midwife or health professional about any concerns you may have.

Allow time to prepare for parenting.

Maintain a healthy social life and keep up your hobbies and interests.

Explore ways to develop a healthier lifestyle.

Build a good network of support for you and your family.

Manage your stress, exercise and eat healthily.

Choose non alcoholic alternatives e.g. alcohol free drinks.

Making healthier choices now (or at any time during your pregnancy) will have a positive impact on the physical health and emotional wellbeing of you and your baby.

**If you are concerned about your drinking or any aspects of your pregnancy it is important that you speak to any of the following health professionals:**

- **GP or Family Doctor •**
  - **Midwife •**
  - **Health Visitor •**
- **Public Health Nurse •**
  - **Obstetrician •**

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