Alcohol

This sheet talks about exposure to alcohol in pregnancy and while breastfeeding. This information should not take the place of medical care and advice from your healthcare provider.

What is alcohol?
Alcohol, ethanol and ethyl alcohol are all names for the ingredient in beer, wine, or hard liquor that gives an intoxicating effect to the drinker. The same amount of alcohol is found in a standard serving of beer (12 ounces), wine (4-5 ounces), or hard liquor (1.5 ounces).

I drink alcohol. Can it make it harder for me to become pregnant?
Some studies have shown an increase in fertility problems with heavy (5 or more drinks a day) alcohol use. It is best to avoid alcohol while trying to get pregnant.

Is there a safe amount of alcohol that I can drink during pregnancy?
There is no known safe amount of alcohol that can be consumed during pregnancy. Alcohol crosses the placenta easily and reaches the developing baby. Differences in genetics and metabolism of alcohol by both the person who is pregnant and the developing baby can lead to a wide range of risks. The risks may be different for the same person in different pregnancies.

Does drinking alcohol increase the chance for miscarriage?
Miscarriage can occur in any pregnancy. Studies have reported higher rates of miscarriage as well as stillbirth among those who drink alcohol during pregnancy.

Does drinking alcohol increase the chance of birth defects?
Every pregnancy starts out with a 3-5% chance of having a birth defect. This is called the background risk. Drinking alcohol in pregnancy increases the chance for the baby to have Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS). Babies with FAS may have a pattern of certain birth defects that can include a 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, healthcare providers may use other terms, such as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). The risks from heavy alcohol use (5 or more drinks a day) and binge drinking (around 5 or more drinks on an occasion) have been well established. The risks for occasional use of lower amounts of alcohol are less clear.

Could drinking alcohol cause other pregnancy complications?
Drinking alcohol in pregnancy is a leading cause of intellectual disability. Alcohol affects brain development. The baby’s brain develops throughout the entire pregnancy. Drinking alcohol at any time in pregnancy increases the chance for the baby to have alcohol-related brain damage which may cause intellectual disabilities, learning problems, or behavioral problems. Drinking may also cause the baby to grow smaller than expected. This means there is no safe time to drink when pregnant.

Does FAS and FASD cause long term issues for the baby?
FAS and FASD cause lifelong challenges, such as problems with learning and poor memory. People with FAS and FASD can have a harder time 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 use have also been reported in these individuals.

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 that can be consumed during pregnancy, 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?

Binge drinking exposes the developing baby to the highest amount of alcohol at one time. However, studies on alcohol use during pregnancy often look at weekly averages, so the effects of certain patterns of drinking alcohol are not well studied.

Will my baby go through withdrawal after birth if I continue to drink alcohol?

Babies have an increased chance of going through withdrawal if they have been exposed to alcohol close to delivery. Symptoms of withdrawal can include tremors, increased muscle tone, restlessness and excessive crying.

How will I know if alcohol has hurt my baby?

It is important to discuss the amount of alcohol you have had during pregnancy with your healthcare provider. Your healthcare provider may offer ultrasounds to look for birth defects and to watch the baby’s growth. Ultrasound cannot tell if alcohol has caused intellectual disabilities, learning difficulties, or if it will affect future behavior.

It is also a good idea to tell your pediatrician about your alcohol use during pregnancy. Your child can be evaluated for effects of prenatal alcohol exposure. Some of the problems caused by prenatal alcohol exposure, such as learning difficulties and behavioral problems, are more likely to be identified as your child gets older. Your child’s healthcare provider can continue to monitor your child over time.

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

Yes. It is recommended that a person who is pregnant stop alcohol using, regardless of how far along in pregnancy they are. The baby will benefit by no longer being exposed to alcohol. Though FAS/FASD cannot be cured, children with FAS/FASD can benefit from an early diagnosis. Being raised in a stable and nurturing home can also lead to better outcomes. Your healthcare provider can talk with you about the services and support that are available for people who want to stop drinking and for children with alcohol related problems.

Can I drink alcohol while breastfeeding?

This should be avoided. Alcohol easily gets into breast milk. The amount of alcohol in the milk is about the same level of alcohol in the breastfeeding person’s bloodstream. Alcohol can pass back and forth from the bloodstream into the milk. Only time can reduce the amount of alcohol in the milk. Pumping and discarding, drinking water, taking caffeine, or exercising do not help your body to get rid of the alcohol faster. It takes about 2 to 2.5 hours for each standard drink to clear from breast milk. For each additional drink, a person must wait another 2-2.5 hours per drink. Drinking alcohol can also make it harder for your body to make milk.

The infant brain continues to grow after birth. Effects on the baby from alcohol in breast milk are not well studied. However, some reports found that babies exposed to alcohol through breastmilk may eat less and/or have changes in their sleeping patterns. If you suspect that the baby has any of these symptoms contact the child’s healthcare provider. One study suggested problems with motor development following exposure to alcohol in breast milk, but other studies did not show the same results. Since breastfeeding has benefits for the baby, speak with your pediatrician about your specific alcohol intake before avoiding breastfeeding. Talk to your healthcare provider about all of your breastfeeding questions.

I drink alcohol. Can it make it harder for me to get my partner pregnant or increase the chance of birth defects?

Some studies have shown that drinking alcohol lowers fertility in men. There is no evidence to suggest that a father’s or sperm donor’s exposure to alcohol causes birth defects. In general, exposures that fathers or sperm donors have are unlikely to increase risks to a pregnancy. For more information, please see the MotherToBaby fact sheet Paternal Exposures at https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/paternal-exposures-pregnancy/pdf/.

Please click here for references.