

## What do experts advise?

Since 2016, the Chief Medical Officers' (CMO) guidance is that:

- If you are pregnant or think you could become pregnant, the safest approach is not to drink alcohol at all, to keep risks to your baby to a minimum
- Drinking in pregnancy can lead to long-term harm to the baby, with the more you drink the greater the risk

This is in agreement with experts' advice internationally.



## Why should I avoid alcohol when pregnant or planning a pregnancy

- ✓ you will reduce the risk of infertility
- ✓ you will reduce the risk of miscarriage
- ✓ you will reduce the risk of stillbirth
- ✓ your baby is less likely to be born prematurely
- ✓ your baby is less likely to be born with a low birth weight
- ✓ you will reduce the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) formerly known as 'cot death'
- ✓ you will ensure your baby will not have Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)

## What is Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)?

FASD results when prenatal alcohol exposure affects the developing brain and body. FASD is a spectrum. Each person with FASD is affected differently. While more than 400 conditions can co-occur, FASD is at its core a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition. All people with FASD have many strengths. Early diagnosis and appropriate support are essential, especially for executive functioning.

(Source: FASD: Preferred UK Language Guide, Seashell Trust/National FASD, 2020).

## Why am I being asked about alcohol?

The new NICE quality standard on FASD states midwives and other professionals should give information about the risk of alcohol harm during pregnancy, that they ask about alcohol-use in pregnancy and that this information is recorded.

You can give permission for this to be included in your child's records which may aid future diagnosis or support if needed.



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## What you need to know





## How does alcohol cause a problem in pregnancy?

Alcohol passes through the placenta and remains in the amniotic fluid for a while afterwards, so even after you have stopped drinking, your baby could still be affected. This is because the baby has not yet developed the ability to process the alcohol.

Alcohol is toxic and can affect the way the baby's brain and body develop leading to lifelong disability.

## I'm pregnant and I've had some drinks, what now?

The Chief Medical Officers advise, 'If you find out you are pregnant after you have drunk alcohol during early pregnancy, you should avoid further drinking. You should be aware that it is unlikely in most cases that your baby has been affected'. Stopping drinking altogether is safest for your baby. However, if you are a regular and heavy drinker it may be unsafe for you to stop suddenly. If you are concerned that you may be drinking dependently, it is important that you speak to your GP or midwife or contact your local specialist service for advice before you try to reduce or stop your drinking.

If you're worried about having drunk alcohol during pregnancy, or you need support to stop drinking, talk to your doctor or midwife. Ask for a referral to the local substance misuse service for detox/reduction support.

## What's the effect on the baby?

The baby develops throughout the entire pregnancy and alcohol use can cause physical conditions such as heart defects or bone malformation (there are more than 400 conditions that can co-occur with FASD). However, everyone with FASD will have damage to their brain and the rest of their central nervous system which is very sensitive to alcohol exposure in pregnancy.

Alcohol causes by far the most neuro-behavioural effects to a developing baby than other substances such as marijuana, cocaine and heroin (BMA, 2016).

**If you do not drink your baby cannot have FASD, it is only caused by alcohol exposure during pregnancy.**



## Will every baby exposed to alcohol get FASD?

There is currently no way to predict which babies will be affected by the alcohol and which will not. This is why experts agree that no alcohol during pregnancy is safest, as it avoids any risk of the baby having FASD.

## How could I tell if my child has FASD?

If your pregnancy was alcohol-exposed, it's important that you know the signs to look out for so early diagnosis and support can be put in place. In the vast majority of cases you cannot tell at birth if a child has FASD. In a small minority of cases there may be specific facial features. Difficulties may present during childhood or adolescence. Some may have developmental delays but others will struggle with some or all of the following:

- Learning
- Memory
- Motor development
- Social relationships
- Emotional regulation
- Attention
- Impulsivity
- Hyperactivity



If you are concerned about your child's development speak to your GP and ask for a referral for an FASD assessment.

**People with FASD can and do have happy fulfilled lives.**

Early diagnosis and support are key to successful outcomes and strategies for other conditions are often ineffective.