

# Pregnancy and Alcohol

If you are pregnant, or are trying to become pregnant, you should not drink alcohol.

## Why should I not drink when I am pregnant?

Advice from the Department of Health is that you should not drink at all if you are pregnant or trying to become pregnant. It is known that if you drink heavily you have an increased risk of miscarriage, and it may cause serious harm to the baby's growth and brain development.

For example, studies have shown that:

- Pregnant women who drink more than 15 units a week have an increased risk of having a baby with a low birthweight.
- Pregnant women who drink more than 20 units a week have an increased risk of having a baby with some damage to the brain causing impaired intellect.
- Pregnant women who drink very heavily risk having a baby with fetal alcohol syndrome. Babies with this syndrome have brain damage, a low birthweight and facial malformations.

However, the exact amount of alcohol that is safe during pregnancy is not known. This is why the advice is not to drink at all. The very early stages of pregnancy may be the most vulnerable time. This is why it is just as important not to drink alcohol when you are trying to become pregnant. If you do choose to drink alcohol when you are pregnant then limit it to one or two units, once or twice a week. And never get drunk.

### What is a unit of alcohol?

One unit of alcohol is in about half a pint of beer, or two thirds of a small glass of wine, or one small pub measure of spirits. See separate leaflet called *'Alcohol and Sensible Drinking'* for details.

## What if I am dependent on alcohol before I become pregnant?

For the sake of your baby's health you should be open and honest about the amount you drink. If you are planning a pregnancy, go to see your doctor before you become pregnant so that professional help can be arranged. Once you are pregnant, many different people may offer you support, including doctors, midwives, social workers and counsellors. This can become confusing but, if you regularly keep in touch with one healthcare professional (usually your midwife or GP), they should be able to make sure that you are not bombarded with too many unnecessary appointments.

## Further information

See separate leaflets in this series, called *'Recommended Safe Limits of Alcohol'*, *'Alcohol and Liver Disease'*, *'Alcohol and Sensible Drinking'* and *'Alcoholism and Problem Drinking'*. Other sources of information include the following:

### Department of Health

The Pregnancy Book

Go to their website - [www.dh.gov.uk](http://www.dh.gov.uk) - and search for 'Pregnancy Book'.

### Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists

Produce an information booklet called 'Alcohol and pregnancy - information for you'.

Web: [www.rcog.org.uk/womens-health/clinical-guidance/alcohol-and-pregnancy-information-you](http://www.rcog.org.uk/womens-health/clinical-guidance/alcohol-and-pregnancy-information-you)

## NOFAS-UK - National Organisation on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome

Tel (helpline): 020 8458 5951 Web: [www.nofas-uk.org](http://www.nofas-uk.org)

Promotes awareness about the risks of alcohol consumption during pregnancy with the goal to reduce the number of babies being born with fetal alcohol syndrome.

## References

- [Pre-conception - advice and management](#), Clinical Knowledge Summaries (2007)
- [Alcohol consumption and the outcomes of pregnancy](#), Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (2006)
- [Alcohol-use disorders - preventing harmful drinking](#), NICE Public Health Guidance (June 2010); *Alcohol-use disorders - preventing the development of hazardous and harmful drinking*
- [Alcohol-use disorders: physical complications](#), NICE Clinical Guideline (June 2010)
- [Pregnancy and complex social factors](#), NICE Clinical Guideline (September 2010); *A model for service provision for pregnant women with complex social factors*
- [Antenatal care: routine care for the healthy pregnant woman](#), NICE Clinical Guideline (March 2008)

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