

The facts about...

Alcohol and pregnancy

for the facts
drinkaware.co.uk

Five key
things you
need to
know

When you're pregnant it can seem like you are being bombarded with information.

There are hundreds of leaflets, books, magazines and websites all about what to do and not to do for the next nine months of your life. Sometimes it's hard to know where to go for trustworthy advice. This is especially true when it comes to knowing how much you can drink when you're pregnant.

Read on to cut through the confusion and find out the key truths about alcohol and pregnancy.

1

There is official government guidance on drinking while you're pregnant

The Department of Health recommends that pregnant women, or women trying for a baby, should avoid alcohol altogether.

If they do choose to drink, to minimise risk to the baby, the government's advice is to not have more than one to two units of alcohol once or twice a week, and not to get drunk.

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) is the independent organisation responsible for providing national guidance on promoting good health and preventing and treating ill health.

NICE additionally advises that the risks of miscarriage in the first three months of pregnancy mean that it is particularly important for women not to drink alcohol at all during that period.¹

Until the 1980s, pregnant women could be prescribed stout to keep their iron levels up – this is no longer advised!



¹ Alcohol guidelines: Eleventh Report of Session 2010–12, House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, 2011. Available at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmsctech/1536/1536.pdf>

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The healthiest option is not to drink when you're pregnant

Scientists aren't sure about the precise impact drinking small amounts of alcohol can have on unborn babies. They do know, however, that high alcohol consumption can be harmful during pregnancy.²

So, you might decide that the safest option for you is to avoid alcohol for nine months. Of course, it's your body and your choice.

If you do decide to drink when you're pregnant, it is extremely important that you know what a unit of alcohol actually is.

What is a unit?

The alcohol content of drinks is measured in units. One drink is hardly ever just one unit. Even a small (125ml) glass of wine or a half pint of standard beer has one-and-a-half units.

One unit is actually 10ml or 8g of pure alcohol. This equals one 25ml single measure of spirits (40% ABV), a third of a pint of beer (4% ABV) or half a standard (175ml) glass of red wine (13% ABV). ABV stands for Alcohol By Volume, which is the percentage of the drink that is pure alcohol.



Use MyDrinkaware, an online drinks diary, to see how many units are in your favourite drink. Visit drinkaware.co.uk

² Alcohol guidelines: Eleventh Report of Session 2010–12, House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, 2011. Available at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmsctech/1536/1536.pdf>

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Alcohol can affect the development of your unborn baby

Drinking any more than one to two units once or twice a week means you could be putting your baby's health at serious risk.

When you drink, the alcohol crosses from your bloodstream through the placenta into your baby's blood. How a baby will be affected depends on how much its mother drinks and at what point in her pregnancy.

Damage to the organs and nervous system through heavy drinking is most likely to happen in the first three months. That's because your baby's liver doesn't mature until the second half of pregnancy so it cannot process alcohol as well as you can.³



³ NHS Choices website, Alcohol and drugs during pregnancy. Available at <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/pages/alcohol-medicines-drugs-pregnant.aspx>

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Drink heavily while you're pregnant and it could affect your baby's health

The more you drink the greater the risk you are taking with your baby's health.

Miscarriage, stillbirth, premature birth and small birth weight are all associated with a mother's binge drinking – consuming more than six units on one occasion. (the equivalent of three medium 175ml glasses of 13% wine).

Experts estimate that in Western countries, one child in 100 is born with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder as a result of their mother's heavy drinking while pregnant.⁴

How serious the condition is depends on how much alcohol was consumed during pregnancy. Symptoms include:

- **learning difficulties, problems with emotional development and behaviour, memory and attention disorders, hyperactivity, difficulty in organising and planning and problems with language**
- **facial deformities, such as a cleft lip**
- **being small, at birth and throughout life**
- **poor muscle tone, which means they are not as strong as normal, so, for example, they may have problems with posture**
- **mental health problems – which can result in a disrupted education, getting into trouble with the police, alcohol and drug problems, and inappropriate sexual behaviour.**

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What is Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder?

Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is an umbrella term for life long alcohol related disorders caused by alcohol exposure before birth. When a pregnant woman drinks alcohol she risks giving her baby brain damage that will last a life time. There is no cure for FASD. The spectrum includes: Foetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS), Alcohol Related Neurodevelopmental Disorder (ARND), Alcohol Related Brain Damage (ARBD), Foetal Alcohol Effects (FAE), partial Foetal Alcohol Syndrome (pFAS).

⁴ NHS Information Centre website, Pregnant women and alcohol. Available at: <http://www.hesonline.nhs.uk/Ease/servlet/ContentServer?siteID=1937&categoryID=945>

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If you're trying to conceive, think about how much you're drinking

Official government guidance advises that if you're trying to have a baby, you should stop drinking. This is to protect the baby in case you're pregnant and don't realise it.

However, alcohol doesn't cause problems only after you become pregnant. There is good scientific evidence that alcohol can reduce fertility in both men and women. It's another reason why, if you're trying to have a baby, both you and your partner might want to cut back on drinking.

Two thirds of women who drink before they conceive cut down on alcohol when they are pregnant.



Staying in control

For official guidance on pregnancy and alcohol, see page one. There is little clear evidence to show that drinking a maximum of one or two units, once or twice a week will have any adverse effect on your baby.



Here are three ways to keep your drinking under control if you're pregnant or trying to have a baby:

A Stand firm.

If you're out with friends or colleagues, you may be under pressure to drink, especially if you haven't announced your pregnancy yet. Tell them you're driving, on a health kick, or simply stick to soft drinks.

B Start slowly.

If you are trying to conceive, try cutting down your units gradually. Start off by reducing your drinking each day, and then try having a few alcohol-free days a week.

C Get support.

Ask your partner to help you by cutting down their drinking as well. If you are trying to conceive this is vital, as drinking impairs sperm count and heavy drinking can cause temporary impotence.

We've got the answers at **drinkaware.co.uk**

Advice

The government advises that people should not regularly drink more than the daily unit guidelines of 3-4 units of alcohol for men (equivalent to a pint and a half of 4% beer) and 2-3 units of alcohol for women (equivalent to a 175 ml glass of 13% wine). 'Regularly' means drinking every day or most days of the week.

Further information

For the facts on alcohol and to keep track of your units through our MyDrinkaware tool, visit the Drinkaware website Drinkaware.co.uk

Your GP can help you figure out if you should make any changes to your drinking, and offer help and advice. Alternatively, talk to your midwife.

If you're concerned about someone's drinking, or your own, Drinkline runs a free, confidential helpline. Call 0800 917 8282.

For more information and advice on Foetal Alcohol Syndrome, go to the National Organisation on Foetal Alcohol Syndrome UK's website www.nofas-uk.org or call their helpline on 020 8458 5951.

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