



PREGNANT?

Alcohol and drugs

Be proactive

Québec 

PREGNANCY: a critical time to take care of yourself and your future baby

Pregnant women must often change certain daily habits and are bombarded with recommendations from every direction. A good approach is to see this period as a special time to take care of yourself and your future baby.

A healthy choice! By adopting a healthy lifestyle, you increase your chances of giving birth to a healthy baby and having a worry-free pregnancy.



ALCOHOL AND PREGNANCY

How much alcohol can be consumed without risk to your baby?

Regular consumption of alcohol as well as binge drinking are especially harmful to foetal development. Scientific studies have not established how much alcohol can be consumed without risk.

**IT IS RECOMMENDED TO AVOID ALCOHOL
ENTIRELY DURING PREGNANCY.**

Is there a period during the pregnancy when it is less dangerous to drink alcohol?

No. During all stages of the pregnancy, the mother's consumption of alcohol can affect foetal development. Brain development is especially sensitive to alcohol, from the first trimester to the last.

THERE IS NO SAFE TIME DURING PREGNANCY WHEN DRINKING ALCOHOL IS WITHOUT RISK.

Is there a type of alcohol that is less harmful for the foetus?

No. All types of alcohol can have harmful effects on the foetus, whether it's wine, beer, spirits, or fortified wines.

DID YOU KNOW THAT ALCOHOL PASSES THROUGH THE PLACENTA AND THAT THE FOETUS HAS THE SAME CONCENTRATION OF ALCOHOL IN ITS BLOOD AS DOES THE MOTHER?

The consequences of foetal exposure to alcohol and FAS

FAS is the acronym for Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. A baby affected by FAS usually displays the following three features:

- **Abnormal facial features**
- **Brain damage (e.g., intellectual impairment)**
- **Growth retardation (weight and size)**

Even in the absence of a FAS diagnosis, a foetus that has been exposed to alcohol may suffer from one or more physical, behavioural, or intellectual impairments. **A diagnosis of FAS is very serious and is part of a much larger group of health problems which is referred to as Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD).**

The effects of consuming alcohol during pregnancy can be numerous and vary from one person to another.

For the pregnant woman, alcohol consumption is associated with an increased risk of:

- **Miscarriage**
- **Premature birth**
- **Stillbirth**

For the baby, alcohol consumption during pregnancy is associated, among other things, with an increased risk of:

- **Growth retardation (weight and size)**
- **Physical defects**
- **Cognitive disabilities (learning, attention, judgment, etc.)**
- **Social difficulties**

The effects of alcohol exposure on the foetus last a lifetime. However, early diagnosis makes it possible to offer care and support adapted to the needs of affected children.

DID YOU KNOW THAT FOETAL EXPOSURE TO ALCOHOL IS ONE OF THE MAIN AVOIDABLE CAUSES OF DEVELOPMENTAL RETARDATION AND CONGENITAL DEFECTS IN NEWBORNS?

A few tips...

- If you drink alcohol to relieve stress, opt for other relaxing activities such as reading, walking, watching a movie, etc.
- Since you are pregnant, take the opportunity to try alcohol-free beverages.
- Discuss your decision to stop drinking alcohol with friends and family and explain the reasons for your choice.
- Ask your physician or other health professional for information on the effects of drinking alcohol during your pregnancy.

And why not a little help from friends and family?

Your spouse, family members, friends, and colleagues can:

- Avoid encouraging you to drink while pregnant
- Bring alcohol-free beverages to group activities
- Support your decision not to drink alcohol during your pregnancy
- Learn more about the dangers of consuming alcohol during pregnancy
- Encourage you to seek help from specialized professionals if you're having trouble stopping drinking during pregnancy

DRUGS AND PREGNANCY

The effects of drug use can be numerous and can take different forms for the pregnant woman and the baby. These effects can also increase when the pregnant woman takes several different drugs at the same time.

For the pregnant women, drug use is associated, among other things, with an increased risk of:

- Miscarriage
- Premature birth
- Stillbirth

For the baby, drug use by the mother during pregnancy is associated, among other things, with an increased risk of:

- Growth retardation (weight and size)
- Withdrawal symptoms at birth (tremors, hyperactivity, inconsolable crying, etc.)
- Abnormal development of the central nervous system (brain)
- Short- and medium-term adjustment difficulties
- Transmission of diseases and viruses like hepatitis and HIV (if using or sharing syringes)

IT IS RECOMMENDED TO AVOID USING DRUGS OF ANY KIND DURING PREGNANCY.

THERE IS NO AMOUNT OR TIME THAT IS CONSIDERED SAFE FOR USING DRUGS.

Possible effects of some drugs

CANNABIS

It has been established that, when a mother consumes cannabis, THC (the main active ingredient of cannabis) passes through the placental barrier. The foetus has the same concentration of THC in its blood as does the mother.

Possible effect on the pregnant mother:

- Premature delivery

COCAINE

Possible effects on the pregnant mother:

- Miscarriage
- Stillborn baby
- Premature delivery

Possible effects on the foetus or baby:

- Withdrawal symptoms after delivery
- Growth retardation (weight and size)
- Adjustment and learning disabilities

HEROIN

Possible effects on the pregnant mother:

- Miscarriage
- Menstrual irregularities
(which may delay acknowledgement of pregnancy)
- Premature delivery

Possible effects on the foetus or baby:

- Withdrawal symptoms after delivery
- Growth retardation (weight and size)
- Adjustment and learning disabilities

The use of other drugs like ecstasy, hallucinogens, and solvents is just as harmful to the progress of the pregnancy and the development of the foetus.

TRUE or FALSE

- **Only the babies of alcoholic mothers can be affected by the adverse effects of prenatal exposure to alcohol.**

False. Women who drink alcohol during pregnancy (*whether they have a problem with alcohol abuse or not*) are at risk of giving birth to babies who are adversely affected by exposure to alcohol. Since it is not known how much alcohol can be consumed without risk, the usual recommendation is to abstain from drinking during pregnancy.

- **Exposing the foetus to alcohol is one of the main avoidable causes of developmental retardation and congenital defects in newborns.**

True. The problems caused by prenatal exposure to alcohol are *avoidable* (unlike spina bifida and Down syndrome or trisomy 21, the other two main causes of congenital malformations¹).

- **Taking heroin during pregnancy can cause withdrawal symptoms in newborns.**

True. At birth, the babies of mothers who have taken *heroin* during pregnancy may display withdrawal symptoms such as tremors, hyperirritability and inconsolable crying. Cocaine use by pregnant women may also lead to withdrawal symptoms in their babies.

1. D. DAVIS (1994). Reaching Out to Children with FAS/FAE: A Handbook for Teachers, Counselors, and Parents Who Work With Children Affected by Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and Fetal Alcohol Effects, West Nyack, New York, http://www.education.gov.ab.ca/French/adt_scol/prevenir/guide.pdf (page consulted April 22, 2007).

- **There is less risk when a mother drinks alcohol toward the end of her pregnancy because the baby is further along in its development.**

False. Alcohol *can affect foetal development throughout the pregnancy*. The baby's brain keeps on developing from the first to the last trimester and is vulnerable to alcohol exposure throughout the pregnancy.

- **Alcohol use during breastfeeding can increase the risk of a newborn being affected by Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).**

False. The effects on the foetus associated with alcohol consumption by the mother (such as foetal alcohol spectrum disorder) can only be caused by alcohol consumption during pregnancy. However, alcohol consumed by the mother enters the breast milk, which can diminish the milk ejection reflex, alter the taste of the milk, and affect the quality of the baby's sleep.

As such, regular consumption as well as occasional consumption of alcohol in large quantities must thus be avoided. Only moderate consumption of alcohol (one or two drinks) on an occasional basis is acceptable. However, to avoid exposing the baby to alcohol, the mother can:

- Breastfeed her baby or express (pump) breast milk *before consuming alcohol*, or
- Wait two hours *after having a drink of alcohol* before breastfeeding.

The wait between taking a drink of alcohol and breastfeeding depends on the mother's weight. For more precise information, consult the table at

http://www.beststart.org/resources/alc_reduction/pdf/brstfd_alc_deskref_eng.pdf.

■ **It is best to stop drinking alcohol when a pregnancy is planned.**

True. Since women who become pregnant sometimes become aware of it several weeks or even months after conception, it is best *to stop alcohol consumption* when a pregnancy is planned. It is especially important for women who want to get pregnant to avoid “binge drinking” (excessive alcohol consumption on a single occasion).

■ **A woman who takes drugs risks having a smaller baby and, consequently, an easier delivery.**

False. A *smaller baby* is often *weaker*. Since the baby may have more trouble contributing to the delivery, *this makes the mother’s work more difficult*. Intrauterine growth retardation can have a major impact on newborns, including higher rates of hospitalization and a greater incidence of perinatal diseases, perinatal mortality, long-term health problems, and learning disabilities².

■ **A baby affected by the mother’s alcohol consumption during pregnancy is sure to have facial abnormalities.**

False. A baby affected by the mother’s alcohol consumption during pregnancy will not necessarily have facial abnormalities. The baby may have problems that are not physically apparent, such as behavioural disorders or learning disabilities.

■ **The effects of prenatal exposure to alcohol last for a lifetime.**

True. Children with health problems caused by alcohol consumption by the mother during pregnancy will suffer *for their entire lives*. However, early diagnosis, guidance, and services adapted to the needs of these children can improve their quality of life.

2. CANADIAN INSTITUTE OF CHILD HEALTH (1994). (2003). The Health of Canada’s Children: A CICH Profile, 3rd ed., <http://www.cich.ca/PDFFiles/ProfileFactSheets/English/LBWEng.pdf> (page consulted on August 13, 2007)

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BE PROACTIVE



The consumption of alcohol and drugs can be harmful to you and your baby throughout your pregnancy. Whether you are at the beginning or the end of your pregnancy, you should avoid all drugs and alcohol. It is never too late to stop. Remember, you can always take steps to protect your health and that of your baby.

If you have an alcohol or drug problem, you should consider seeking help from a health professional. He or she can give you valuable advice to help you stop.

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