



Pregnancy and alcohol



Families and communities can support women to have an alcohol-free pregnancy.

Visit askaboutalcohol.ie for more information about alcohol and pregnancy, further information leaflets and to find details of support services.

If you are worried about your drinking, contact the confidential HSE Alcohol and Drugs Helpline for information and support services.

Call **1800 459 459**

from Monday to Friday, 9.30am to 5.30pm

or email helpline@hse.ie

Visit drugs.ie for information on other drugs and how they may affect pregnancy.



Pregnancy and alcohol - What you need to know

Pregnancy is a time when many women want to know what they can do to keep themselves and their baby healthy. One of the best things you can do is to avoid drinking alcohol while you are pregnant or trying to become pregnant.

This leaflet explains why it's best to avoid alcohol to keep your baby healthy.

Why should I avoid alcohol during pregnancy?

Alcohol can damage your baby's developing brain and body.

Drinking while pregnant doesn't mean your baby will definitely be harmed, but it can happen, and the effects may not be evident at birth.

What harm does alcohol do?

Alcohol causes two types of problems:

- foetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD), and
- foetal alcohol syndrome (FAS).

FAS and FASD are only caused by alcohol. An alcohol-free pregnancy means there is no risk of FASD or FAS.

What problems does FASD cause?

FASD causes problems with a baby's body, brain, behaviour and can cause problems throughout a person's life.

For example:

- Hyperactivity and poor attention,
- Learning difficulties and a lower IQ,
- Difficulty controlling behaviour,
- Difficulty getting along with other people,
- Being smaller than expected,
- Problems with eating and sleeping,
- Emotional and mental health problems.

What is FAS?

Foetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) is more serious and can happen when you drink heavily during your pregnancy. In addition to all the signs of FASD listed above, your baby may:

- be smaller than normal or underweight,
- have damage to their brain and spinal cord,
- have an abnormally small head or eyes, abnormally-shaped ears or facial features,
- have problems with their heart and genitals.

Can FAS and FASD be cured?

There is no cure for FASD or FAS. Diagnosing and treating the symptoms early can help a child to manage better.

Why are some babies affected and not others?

Doctors can't say exactly what will happen to a baby if a woman drinks alcohol. It depends on different things.

For example:

- How much alcohol you drink – the more you drink, the greater the risk,
- How often you drink alcohol,
- When you drink during pregnancy,
- How your body absorbs and breaks down the alcohol.

Will the occasional drink do any harm?

There is no proven level of safe drinking during pregnancy, but heavy or frequent drinking is more dangerous.

Is it safe to drink after the first 3 months?

Drinking alcohol at any time during pregnancy can cause damage. This is because your baby's brain develops throughout pregnancy.

No amount of alcohol during pregnancy is risk-free.

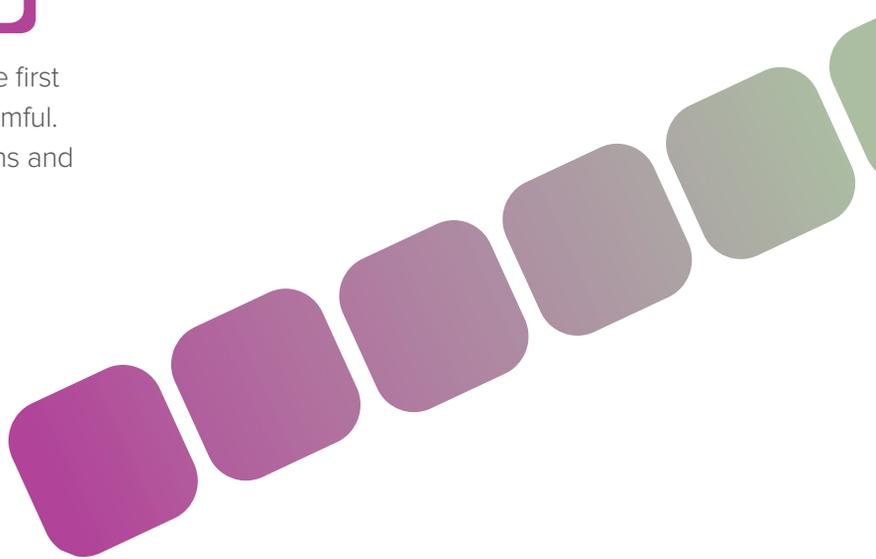
Drinking, especially heavy drinking during the first three months of pregnancy, is particularly harmful. This is the time when your baby's body organs and facial features are developing.

What should I do if I have already drunk alcohol during my pregnancy?

- Stop drinking alcohol for the rest of your pregnancy. The less your baby is exposed to alcohol over the course of the pregnancy, the greater their chance for healthy brain growth and development.
- If you drink regularly and you find it hard to stop, you may be reluctant to speak about your drinking. Your GP, midwife or obstetrician can help and support you. You can also call the HSE Alcohol and Drugs Helpline for free on 1800 459 459 and speak in confidence with a professional.

What should I do if I'm planning a family?

If you are planning to become pregnant, giving up alcohol while you are trying to conceive (get pregnant) as well as during the pregnancy will avoid any possible risk to your baby.



How can I plan an alcohol-free pregnancy?

Some women find it hard to give up alcohol for nine months (and for the time when they are planning to become pregnant), especially if they drink regularly or everyone around them is drinking. You may feel under pressure to drink because other people expect you to or because you don't want people to guess that you're pregnant. The following advice will help you to have an alcohol-free pregnancy:

- **Explain your reasons for not drinking** to your partner, friends and family and ask them to support you. You could show them this leaflet to help them understand why you want to stay away from alcohol.
- **Plan ahead** how you will manage any pressure to drink from other people or desires you may have to drink.
- If a lot of your time was previously spent in situations where drinking alcohol was expected, **think about other hobbies** or activities that you might enjoy away from alcohol.

For more advice, support or tips for an alcohol-free pregnancy visit www.askaboutalcohol.ie

How partners, friends and family can help

- **Reduce your drinking or give up for a time.** If your partner or loved one is pregnant, avoiding alcohol can be a great way to support her and make it easier for her to stay alcohol free. Find new routines and activities so you can spend time together away from alcohol.
- **Avoid pressure.** Never pressurise someone into taking a drink or make a comment about someone refusing a drink. In our drinking culture, it can be hard for women to resist this pressure, especially if they aren't ready to tell people about their pregnancy.
- **Make social events easier.** If you're hosting a social event, have a wide variety of alcohol-free drinks available, and be discreet in the way you offer drinks to avoid people commenting on a choice of drink.
- **Be supportive.** While being pregnant is a great reason to make healthy lifestyle choices, it's not always easy. Avoid criticising if your loved one finds it hard and instead focus on trying to find practical ways to help.

