

What you need to know about

the risks of alcohol and pregnancy

Key facts

- If you are pregnant or planning a pregnancy, you should not drink any alcohol.
- Alcohol can damage the developing baby at every stage of pregnancy. This includes from the first moment your baby is conceived, which may be before you know you are pregnant.
- Alcohol can damage the developing baby's brain, body and organs, and can lead to a lifelong disability known as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).
- Alcohol also increases the risk of miscarriage, stillbirth and premature birth, and babies being small for gestational age or having low birth weight.
- Any alcohol consumed during pregnancy passes directly to the developing baby via the placenta.

Advice on alcohol and pregnancy

The National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) *Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks From Drinking Alcohol (2020)* advise that people who are pregnant or planning a pregnancy should not drink any alcohol. This is because:

- At every stage of pregnancy, any alcohol consumed passes directly to your baby. The developing baby's blood alcohol level increases as your blood alcohol level increases.
- The baby's brain starts developing very early in pregnancy, often before someone knows they are pregnant.
- Drinking alcohol in pregnancy can damage the developing baby's brain and lead to Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).
- FASD is a lifelong disability, and people living with FASD can experience physical, behavioural and cognitive challenges.

✦ Risks of alcohol at different stages of pregnancy

Alcohol can damage the developing baby at all stages of pregnancy. This includes fertility and conception (fertilisation and implantation of the egg), the very early stages of pregnancy, and development of the baby throughout the pregnancy.

At every stage of pregnancy, any alcohol consumed passes directly to the developing baby.

Alcohol can damage the development of different organs and systems of the developing baby's body, including the brain, heart, kidneys and lungs.

The brain starts developing very early in pregnancy and continues developing throughout pregnancy. It is the organ that is most severely damaged by alcohol consumed during pregnancy. Alcohol can impact both the brain structure and brain functions of the developing baby.

The very early stages of pregnancy are a critical time when the developing baby is extra sensitive to the effects of alcohol. It is also the stage before you can do a test and when you are unlikely to know you are pregnant. This is why it is important to stop drinking alcohol when you start trying to get pregnant.

Risks of alcohol consumption when planning a pregnancy

Any alcohol you drink can damage your developing baby from the moment of conception. This is because alcohol can interfere with the development of cells that form the placenta as well as the cells that will form the fetus. Alcohol can also impact the fertility of you and your partner and increase the time it takes to get pregnant.

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)

FASD is a lifelong disability caused by alcohol exposure during pregnancy. It is the leading preventable non-genetic developmental disability in Australia.

People with FASD can experience lifelong physical, behavioural, and cognitive challenges. Many people with FASD experience:

- physical and emotional developmental delay
- impaired speech and language development
- learning problems, such as problems with memory and attention, and
- difficulty controlling behaviour.

These challenges can affect each person with FASD in different ways. People with FASD also have a range of strengths, talents and interests. Having access to diagnosis, disability support, services and early intervention results in better outcomes throughout their lives.

For more information about FASD see *What you need to know about Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder* at everymomentmatters.org.au/resources

Talking about your alcohol use

If you have any questions about alcohol and pregnancy, or you need support to stop drinking or cut back, you can talk to your doctor, midwife, or obstetrician.

Health professionals speak to lots of people about alcohol. They can answer questions and provide information on services offering support and advice.

More information and support

- To learn more about alcohol, pregnancy, breastfeeding and FASD, visit: everymomentmatters.org.au
- For help cutting back on alcohol, you can speak to a doctor. You can also find support, counselling and referral from the National Alcohol and Other Drug Hotline on **1800 250 015** or drughelp.gov.au
- To learn more about Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) or find FASD-informed services, contact FASD Hub at fasdhub.org.au or NOFASD at nofasd.org.au or **1800 860 613**
- For more information on the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) Alcohol Guidelines, visit: nhmrc.gov.au/alcohol

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Learn more about FARE at fare.org.au

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