



## Questions and Answers on Alcohol and Tobacco Use in Pregnancy

### What are the risks if I drink alcohol when pregnant?

There are a number of risks to your developing baby if you drink alcohol when pregnant.

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is the name for the range of harms caused by alcohol use during pregnancy. These harms can include brain damage, vision and hearing problems, slow growth, and birth defects, such as bones that are not properly formed and heart problems. Brain damage can mean that your child will have lifelong learning disabilities and problems in memory, reasoning and judgment.

### What drinks are harmful?

All drinks with alcohol can be harmful to your developing baby. Alcohol is in beer, wine, hard liquor, coolers and ciders.

### Is there any safe time to drink alcohol during pregnancy?

No. There is no safe time to drink alcohol during pregnancy. The baby's brain and nervous system develop throughout pregnancy. It is never too late to quit or cut down.

### How much alcohol is risky?

It is known that alcohol can harm the baby, but exactly how much alcohol it takes to cause the harm is not known. Drinking more than 2 drinks on any 1 day, and drinking regularly are the most harmful. A drink means a can of beer (350 ml/12 oz), a glass of wine (150/ml/5 oz), or a shot of hard liquor (40 ml/1.5 oz).

The potential of harming the baby is influenced by many factors:

- How much alcohol is used
- If other drugs are being used at the same time
- The mother's overall health and safety
- Genetics, and many other factors

It is safest not to drink at all when you are pregnant or when you are planning on becoming pregnant.

### Which is more harmful – to continue using alcohol, tobacco and drugs or to withdraw from them?

In most cases it is best for the baby if you withdraw from all substances, and it is important to get a doctor or community health nurse to monitor your health and the baby's health while you do this. For some drugs it is best to taper slowly off, and the help of a doctor is important with this.

### What are the risks if I smoke during pregnancy?

If you smoke during pregnancy you have a higher risk of having a low birth weight baby, miscarriage, and birth complications. Smoking during pregnancy has also been linked to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.

### What if people tell me it is too stressful to quit smoking during my pregnancy?

Some people may tell you it is better to keep smoking, but this is not true. If you continue to smoke during pregnancy, you may have a low birth weight baby with other health problems. If you cannot quit smoking when you are pregnant, focus on reducing the amount you smoke.

### Can my baby be affected by other people's smoke (second hand smoke)?

Yes. Second hand smoke can cause health problems for you and your baby.

### I have known women who have used alcohol and tobacco during pregnancy and their babies seem fine – how can that be?

Alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs affect each pregnant woman and her baby differently. It depends on when, how much, and how often you drink. It also depends on whether or not you use one or several drugs at the same time, what else is going on in your life, and how your body reacts to drugs. Different problems also happen at different stages of your pregnancy. And, some of the effects of drugs on the baby are obvious at birth, but other effects don't appear until later in life.

### What if I was drinking before I knew I was pregnant?

Don't panic. It is not uncommon that pregnant women drink alcohol before knowing they are pregnant, given that over 50 per cent of births in Canada are not planned. Stress and worry can make things worse for you and your baby.

It is never too late to stop drinking, smoking or using other drugs during pregnancy. Quitting now and looking after your own health are the best ways to reduce the risk of harm to your baby. There are also other steps you can take to be healthy and protect your baby.

*These Questions and Answers were adapted from:*

- 1) A fact sheet prepared by the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission, that in turn drew from the Give and Take booklet prepared by Action on Women's Addictions – Research and Education (AWARE), Ontario.
- 2) The BCRCF Guidelines for Alcohol Use in the Perinatal Period and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, 2005.



## Are over-the-counter and prescription drugs safe to use during pregnancy?

Some are safe and some are not. Always check with a doctor, pharmacist, or community health nurse before you take any medication.

## Is it true that it is okay to drink alcohol when breastfeeding?

No. Small amounts of alcohol and other drugs pass through your breast milk. Infants exposed to alcohol in their mother's breast milk may have more difficulty in learning to co-ordinate their movements. And, infants tend to have less restful sleep and sleep for shorter periods of time. Try to drink other liquids, like milk or water. They help your milk flow and are better for both of you.

## What else can I do to reduce the risks?

As well as not drinking alcohol and not using tobacco and other drugs, there are other steps you can take to be healthy and to protect your developing baby, including:

- Get lots of rest
- See your doctor, nurse or midwife regularly
- Eat healthy food
- Stop or cut down on your use of cigarettes and other drugs
- Reduce your stress. The stress that can result from stopping drinking or using tobacco or other drugs is not as harmful to your baby as the substance itself. So, it is better to quit or cut down. Try reducing stress by going for walks, taking a warm bath, or talking with a supportive friend or family member.

## What can those around pregnant women do to provide support?

Partners, family and friends play an important role in supporting women to cut down or stop drinking and using drugs. Support can be provided in a number of different ways:

### Communicate

- Tell her that you care about her
- Let her share her feelings
- Be sincere, caring and non-judgmental – do not take her alcohol or drug use personally

### Assist

- Offer practical support including helping with transportation to appointments or treatment
- Offer to care for other children
- Share activities that do not include alcohol, tobacco or other drugs as in go to the movies or go for a walk

### Encourage

- Recognize her efforts and celebrate small successes
- Offer to work through problems and barriers to change together
- Ask if there are ways you can support her

## What supports are available if I find it hard to make changes on my own?

There are a variety of services to support you, such as pregnancy outreach programs, maternity care clinics, and alcohol and drug counselling services. Contact your local Public Health Unit to find out about services in your area.

If you need help from an alcohol counselor, you can call the Alcohol and Drug Information and Referral Service, for information on where counseling is available in your area. In Greater Vancouver call 604-660-9382, outside Greater Vancouver, call toll-free 1-800-663-1441.

Pregnancy Outreach Programs are available to support pregnant women to have healthy babies *in communities* across BC. To find a Pregnancy Outreach Program in your area, visit the BC Association of Pregnancy Outreach Programs Website at <http://www.bcapop.ca>.

## You can call the BC NurseLine to speak to a registered nurse, available 24-hours every day:

- In Greater Vancouver, call 604-215-4700
- In BC, call toll-free 1-866-215-4700
- Deaf and hearing-impaired, call 1-866-889-4700
- Pharmacist available 5 pm to 9 am every day
- Translation services in more than 130 languages upon request

