

A Teaching and Learning Resource in Maternal Health

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Alcohol Use in Pregnancy

The adverse effects of alcohol include:

- Decreased fertility (from male and female alcohol abuse)
- Increased rate of miscarriage
- Increased rate of structural birth defects
- Increased risk of premature delivery
- Decreased fetal growth
- Impaired brain development and function that is manifest as learning problems, low academic achievement, hyperkinetic, impulsive and aggressive behaviour disorders

There is continuing debate about the risks from an occasional drink of alcohol and the effects of low level consumption on the fetus. Epidemiological evidence suggests a threshold effect from 10g absolute alcohol daily on the risk of premature labour and fetal growth restriction. i.e no effect on these two outcomes for women who consume no more than one standard drink daily throughout pregnancy. As a consequence British authorities permit one or two units of alcohol i.e. one small glass of wine, one measure of spirits or one half pint (300 ml) of beer once or twice per week but only after 12 weeks gestation. There is epidemiological evidence that regular alcohol intake in the preconception month and during the first trimester increases the risk of pre term birth and unexpectedly small babies. A pregnant woman should never drink to the point of intoxication.

Other authorities point out that a similar safe threshold has not been demonstrated as safe as far as fetal brain growth and development is concerned. Many therefore still recommend complete abstinence from alcohol in pregnancy.

Many women are concerned about their unwise use of alcohol around the time of conception and in the early days or weeks before they recognise that they may be pregnant. Although there are effects on fertility and the risk of miscarriage from alcohol use these women can be reassured that, if the pregnancy continues, there is unlikely to be any effect on fetal development. Fetotoxic effects of alcohol at this stage of pregnancy are assumed to be “all or nothing” although there remains an increased risk of pre term birth and the birth of an unexpectedly small baby

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