

# Alcohol and pregnancy

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Most women cut their drinking down to a few drinks a week or stop drinking completely once they find out they are pregnant. It is estimated that one in twenty pregnant women drink more than 9 drinks per week, which is the limit for high-scale consumption during pregnancy. One drink or serving of alcohol is one (33 cl) bottle of medium-strength beer, 12 cl of wine or 4 cl of spirits.

Alcohol causes foetal damage. When the mother consumes alcohol, the foetus is also exposed as alcohol passes through the placenta and into the foetus via the umbilical cord. The blood alcohol level of the foetus might be even higher than that of the mother.

Even though there is no proof that a very small amount of alcohol is harmful for the foetus, the risk can also not be eliminated. This is why the experts do not usually define a limit for safe alcohol use for pregnant women.

An occasional use of alcohol before the woman knows she is pregnant is not likely to cause problems. However, the foetus does begin to develop as soon as the woman misses her period, so the use of alcohol should be stopped or at least cut down to an absolute minimum as soon as the woman suspects she is pregnant.

Binge drinking is particularly harmful for the development of the foetus. The organs of the foetus begin to form during the first trimester. Binge drinking during early pregnancy can lead to foetal deformities, for example a heart defect.

Alcohol restricts foetal growth throughout the pregnancy. Risks also include disturbances in the functioning of the placenta, bleeding which may lead to infections, and premature detachment of the placenta. C-sections are also more common with high-scale consumers of alcohol than other mothers.

The brain of the foetus continues to develop throughout pregnancy. The most harmful consequence of alcohol use for the child's future is a central nervous system dysfunction, the severity of which is proportionate to the amount of alcohol consumed and the duration of alcohol exposure during pregnancy. The longer the woman uses alcohol during pregnancy, the more likely and the more severe the damage to the brain of the foetus. Alcohol-induced damage to the central nervous system can, in its most serious form, lead to mental disabilities. Milder symptoms, such as problems with concentration, learning, and linguistic development, cannot always be connected to alcohol.

## To sum up:

- When you are planning a pregnancy or when pregnancy is a possibility, avoid binge drinking. The risk of deformities in the foetus grows considerably, if the mother has been intoxicated in the early weeks of the pregnancy.
- When you find out you are pregnant, stop drinking altogether or cut down to an absolute minimum. It has been found that the risk of foetal damage increases considerably if the mother has more than 1.5 servings of alcohol (e.g. a pint of medium-strength beer) a day. Binge drinking is particularly harmful for the development of the foetus. It has not been established that a single occasional drink during pregnancy has an effect on the development of the baby.
- If you feel like you cannot control your drinking, get help. You can bring the matter up in prenatal care.

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