

Pregnancy, alcohol and other drugs.

Pregnancy is a time of great change for the person having the baby and the loved ones supporting them. If you are pregnant, breastfeeding, thinking of having a baby, or are supporting someone who is having a baby, it is important to consider the potential effects of different types of drugs to reduce any negative impacts on the pregnancy. This fact sheet provides an overview of the information that might be useful with respect to pregnancy, alcohol and other drugs.

What’s the first step?

If you are considering becoming pregnant or are already pregnant then it is important to consider what you can do to improve the health outcomes for you and your baby¹. There are a range of things to consider, including:

- Understanding the drugs that you may be taking and their effects on you while you are pregnant
- If you are currently taking any medications or other drugs and would like to stop, seek medical advice
- Organising regular appointments to keep track of pregnancy progress
- Taking simple steps to improve your diet¹.

Alcohol and other drugs

There are a range of substances that people might use or come into contact with before considering having a baby.

The following substances may be harmful during pregnancy:

- Legal drugs such as alcohol, tobacco and caffeine
- Complementary medicines such as herbal preparations and nutritional supplements
- Over-the-counter medicines such as antacids, cold and flu medicines, diet pills, laxatives and analgesics
- Prescribed medicines such as analgesics, tranquillisers and sleeping pills
- Illegal drugs such as cannabis, amphetamines, cocaine, ecstasy, GHB, hallucinogens and heroin
- Drugs used to treat opiate or alcohol dependence such as methadone, buprenorphine and naltrexone
- Other substances such as glues and aerosols (inhalants or volatile substances).

Why is alcohol and other drug use during pregnancy an important health issue?

Alcohol and other drugs can be harmful to a developing baby throughout the pregnancy, as they will reach the fetus through the placenta or the fallopian tube. The health outcomes will depend on the drugs that are taken, but the impact of each drug will depend on:

- Age
- Gender
- The individual’s state of health
- How they enter the body: by mouth, by injection, snorted or inhaled, used on the skin, used as suppositories
- The amount used
- How often they are used
- The environment in which they are used.

Some drugs can cause a baby to be born too small or too soon, or to have withdrawal symptoms, birth defects, or learning and behavioural problems. The impact of alcohol or other drugs on the baby may include conditions such as Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, or Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), or may increase the possibility of Sudden Infant Death syndrome (SIDS).

Alcohol and pregnancy

The National Health and Medical Research Council's *Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol* recommend that for women who are pregnant or planning a pregnancy not drinking is the safest option².

Due to ethical limitations with research in this space, it is not possible to establish a 'no-effect' level. For this reason it is difficult to set a safe or no-risk drinking level while pregnant.

If you are concerned about your alcohol or drug use, there is confidential help available. Call DrugInfo on 1300 85 85 84 for further information.

References

1. Royal Women's Hospital. (2018, April 20). Royal Women's Hospital. Retrieved from *A healthy start*: thewomens.org.au/health-information/pregnancy-and-birth/pregnancy-drugs-alcohol/overview-a-healthy-start
2. National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC). (2009). *Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol*. Canberra: NHMRC.

Additional Information

Royal Women's Hospital – Pregnancy and AOD • thewomens.org.au/health-information/pregnancy-and-birth/pregnancy-drugs-alcohol

Pregnant Pause • pregnantpause.org.au

Drug Facts • adf.org.au/drug-facts

Preventing FASD • adf.org.au/insights/preventing-fasd

Support Services

DrugInfo • 1800 85 85 84

ADF's free, confidential phone service, providing information and referral for alcohol and other drugs.

DirectLine • 1800 888 236

Free, confidential service offering over the phone counselling, support and referral (24 hours, 7 days a week).

Quitline • 13 78 48

Confidential service supporting people who want to quit smoking.



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