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Safest not to drink during pregnancy, best recommendation

CanFASD cautions that although conversation about stigmatization is important, there is still no established safe level of alcohol to consume during pregnancy

May 19, 2017 — CanFASD, Canada’s leading FASD research network, says that a recent article posted by the [The Guardian](#) presents potentially harmful information about pregnancy and alcohol. The article posted on Thursday, May 18th claimed that warning pregnant women over dangers of alcohol goes too far. A similar article posted to [The Telegraph](#) states that advising women not to drink while pregnant is “sexist” and causes “needless anxiety”.

The two articles are based on [a news release](#) issued by the British Pregnancy Advisory Service promoting an upcoming conference entitled, *Policing Pregnancy: Who Should be a Mother?*

CanFASD agrees that although conversation around compassionate, non-judgmental ways to communicate this message to women and expectant mothers is indeed important—the current recommendations do not overstate risk, nor do they remove a woman's right or ability to make a choice, rather, they provide clear, essential information in order that she may do so. Providing women with accurate information and a supportive, safe environment to make the healthiest choice for herself and her developing baby are essential in reducing prevalence of FASD.

Dr. Nancy Poole, Director of the Centre of Excellence for Women's Health and Prevention Lead with CanFASD Research Network says:

“It is indeed a challenge to give helpful health messaging to women about alcohol and pregnancy, when there is no known safe level of alcohol consumption when pregnant. As the Guardian article correctly points out, alcohol is a teratogen, which means it causes birth defects. Women have a right to know this. The message that it is “safest not to drink alcohol in pregnancy” seems a quite clear and non-threatening way to state the risk.

Then women make the best decisions they can, with the support of their health care providers, on their use not only of alcohol, but also use/exposure to tobacco, some prescribed medications, and environmental chemicals known to cause congenital abnormalities. Clear public health messaging, coupled with the opportunity to discuss the risks with a compassionate and informed health care provider are critical to support women’s and fetal health.”

The recommendations in question come from the UK chief Medical Officers who last year altered guidelines to advise avoiding alcohol altogether for the duration of a pregnancy. The recommendations, which align with those from [The Public Health Agency of Canada](#), are based on the fact that, despite extensive research, there is still no established safe level of alcohol to consume during pregnancy.

The previous guidelines encouraged exercising moderation through one to two units of alcohol once or twice a week. However, terms such as moderate, low level and light are unclear and subjective. Conflicting messages in the media about how much alcohol can be safely consumed perpetuate confusion. The clearest message is that not consuming alcohol at all during pregnancy is completely safe.

CanFASD encourages a discussion that pushes people to question the place of alcohol in society and our reluctance to consider its harms. “Instead of questioning how much is safe to drink while pregnant, CanFASD encourages discussion around society’s resistance to accept the harmfulness of alcohol.” says Audrey McFarlane, CanFASD executive director.



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About CanFASD:

The Canada Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder Research Network (CanFASD) is a collaborative, interdisciplinary research network, with researchers and partners across the nation. CanFASD's unique partnership brings together many scientific viewpoints to address complexities of FASD, with a focus on ensuring that research knowledge is translated to community and policy action. Our mission is to produce and maintain national, collaborative research designed for sharing with all Canadians, leading to prevention strategies and improved support services for people affected by Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.