

It's safest not to drink during pregnancy. What does this mean?

Information for Service Providers

According to Canada's Low Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines, "The safest option during pregnancy or when planning to become pregnant, or about to breastfeed, is to not drink alcohol at all."
These guidelines were developed by a team of independent Canadian and international experts on behalf of the National Alcohol Strategy Advisory Committee and are based on the most recent and best available scientific research and evidence.

No Safe Time "Zero for Nine" is best

There is no threshold of alcohol use in pregnancy that has been definitively proven safe. Exposure to alcohol at any time in a pregnancy can affect the fetus' brain. Even from the very start of pregnancy, alcohol can have serious and permanent consequences.

What to tell women: There is no safe time to drink alcohol during pregnancy. Your baby's brain is developing throughout pregnancy. In fact, it's best to stop drinking before you get pregnant.

No Safe Kind Binge drinking = more than 3 drinks

Any type of alcohol (beer, coolers, wine or spirits) can harm the fetus. Some of these drinks have higher alcohol content per volume than others. What matters is the amount and frequency of alcohol consumed, not the type of drink. Binge drinking and heavy drinking are very harmful to a fetus.

What to tell women: All types of alcohol (beer, coolers, wine, or spirits) can harm your baby. Binge drinking and heavy drinking are very harmful to a baby.

No Safe Amount

While some studies have shown minimal risk of harm at lower levels of consumption (e.g., 1-2 drinks a week), the potential for misunderstanding standard drink sizes and the impossibility of factoring in other individual risks (e.g., genetics, the effects of nutrition and stress, and other substance use) means that the safest course of action is to avoid alcohol completely.

What to tell women: It's best not to drink any alcohol during your pregnancy. There is no known safe level of alcohol use during pregnancy.

What About Breastfeeding?

Alcohol passes into a woman's bloodstream and into her breast milk at similar levels. While babies are exposed to a very small amount of the alcohol a mother drinks, they do have a rapidly developing central nervous system and an underdeveloped ability to metabolize alcohol. At present, there is only limited research on the effects of alcohol during breastfeeding.

What to tell women: Having an occasional alcoholic drink has not been shown to be harmful to a breastfed infant. Ideally it is best to avoid breastfeeding for about two hours after drinking one alcoholic beverage.

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References

1. Best Start Resource Centre (2013). *Mixing Alcohol and Breastfeeding: Resource for mothers and partners about drinking alcohol while breastfeeding*. Best Start Resource Centre: Toronto, Ontario.
2. Butt, P., Beirness, D., Gliksman, L., Paradis, C., & Stockwell, T. (2011). *Alcohol and health in Canada: A summary of evidence and guidelines for low-risk drinking*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse.



The Prevention Conversation

It's time to talk about alcohol and pregnancy

