



ALCOHOL AND HEALTH

PREGNANCY AND DRINKING: YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED



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INTRODUCTION

Éduc'alcool is an independent, not-for-profit prevention and education organization whose mission is to improve the relationship between Quebecers and alcohol by informing them about everything related to drinking.

To that end, we develop prevention, education and information programs to help young people and adults make responsible, enlightened decisions about drinking.

“Pregnancy and Drinking: Your Questions Answered” was produced in cooperation with the *College des medecins du Quebec*. It provides clear, concise answers to some of the most common questions asked by pregnant women and women planning to become pregnant.

This is a revised version of the original booklet, which has been printed eight times. It is a synthesis of information provided by doctors Harry Bard, neonatologist at Sainte-Justine Hospital, Marie-Chantal Lemonnier, obstetrician-gynaecologist at OB-GYN Women’s Care Clinic, and Jean-Pierre Chiasson, Medical Director of the *Clinique du Nouveau départ*. Valuable input was also provided by Louise Nadeau, professor emerita at the Université de Montréal. This document also includes information published by the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada when its recommendations were updated in 2020.

Éduc'alcool is most grateful to all of the above for their generous contribution.



**PREGNANCY AND DRINKING:
YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED**

1 My partner and I have decided to have a child. Can I continue to drink until I become pregnant?

Abstaining from drinking from the moment you decide to have a baby ensures the healthiest environment for conception and foetal development. Since it can be difficult to determine the exact moment when conception occurs, it's better to play it safe. Also, the embryo is particularly vulnerable during the first trimester, and remains vulnerable throughout the pregnancy.

2 I've just learned that I'm six weeks pregnant. I had a few drinks recently. Should I be worried about my baby?

There is no reason to worry if you had an occasional drink or two. There are no studies showing that a small quantity of alcohol, such as a 5-ounce glass of wine, has any harmful effects. However, this does not mean that it would be wise to continue drinking occasionally for the rest of your pregnancy, since we can't rule out the possibility that the absence of research results may be due to our current inability to measure the negative effects. That's why the scientific community recommends abstinence from the moment you are likely to become pregnant. If you regularly have more than four drinks per occasion, or if you are at all worried, you should speak to your doctor. Remember: It's never too late to ensure the healthy development of the foetus. The safest option is not drinking at all; at the very least, you should cut down on your drinking.

3 What does "one drink" mean?

One drink is 341 ml/12 oz. of beer or cider (5% alcohol), 142 ml/5 oz. of wine (12% alcohol) or 43 ml/1.5 oz. of spirits (40% alcohol). Each of these has the same amount of alcohol and is considered a standard drink.

4 I enjoy a glass of wine when I eat a good meal. Do I have to change my habits during my pregnancy?

To date, researchers have not been able to determine the exact amount of alcohol that is completely safe for the developing foetus, even though there is no evidence that the occasional drink has any harmful effects. We do know, however, that the risk of miscarriage, birth defects, growth retardation and mental disorders increases, the more drinks the mother has on each occasion, and the more frequently she drinks. Abstaining from drinking is the safest choice. In any case, you can always discuss your drinking with your doctor and get help if you need it.

5 Does heavy drinking affect the foetus?

Yes. A pregnant woman who frequently drinks a lot is more likely to give birth to a child with specific problems, known collectively as foetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD). These include growth retardation, mental disorders, heart malformations, an abnormally small head, and other facial or skeletal abnormalities. Occasional heavy drinking also increases the risk of similar problems.

Any woman who has difficulty controlling her drinking should discuss the problem with her doctor or another qualified expert before even thinking about getting pregnant, and then throughout the pregnancy, to ensure that she gets the proper support.

6 Does limited drinking endanger the foetus in the same way?

No. The risk to the foetus reduces if you have only one drink every now and then. The effects of alcohol are proportional to the amount you drink and how frequently you drink. That's why abstaining from drinking throughout your pregnancy is the safest choice. Remember, too, that alcohol is never the only factor involved in the development of the baby. The parents' basic health, their medical history, their lifestyle, the mother's diet, external pollutants, and tobacco and drug use during pregnancy all have an impact, as well.

7 Why is alcohol bad for the baby?

Alcohol is a toxic substance that passes quickly from the mother's bloodstream to the baby's. Because all the organs of the foetus are in the process of being formed, they are particularly vulnerable to any toxic substance. In the best interests of her baby, a woman should modify her lifestyle from the time she plans to become pregnant, i.e. cut back on her drinking or, better still, abstain from drinking; avoid all other toxic substances; watch what she eats, etc.

8 Is it true that wine, beer and cider are less damaging to the foetus than spirits?

No. As we said in the answer to question 3, a standard serving of each contains exactly the same amount of alcohol.

9 We're about to celebrate our tenth wedding anniversary. Can I drink on this special occasion?

This is a big event and it's important for you to celebrate it. Why not use the opportunity to find a way to mark the occasion without alcohol? There are all kinds of refreshing and festive non-alcoholic beverages that you can enjoy and still be in "party mode." In fact, you'll find recipes for more than 160 of them at alternalcohol.com. However, if you insist, and decide to have a drink while eating, even though it is not recommended, remember that nobody has a right to make a pregnant woman feel guilty for choosing to have an occasional drink.

10 Can alcohol interact with the medications I take during pregnancy?

Yes. Many pregnant women take medication for various reasons. The liver is the main organ responsible for eliminating both alcohol and medications. If you drink while taking medication, the alcohol may cause the liver to metabolize the medication differently, leading to unexpected reactions. It's one more reason to avoid drinking during pregnancy.

11 I am breast-feeding my baby. Is it OK to have a drink now and then?

Any woman who is breast-feeding must think about her own well-being and that of her baby. You need to eat a balanced diet and get plenty of rest. And you should never drink while actually breast-feeding, because the baby will absorb the same amount of alcohol as you do. A nursing mother may drink occasionally (not more than two drinks per occasion) provided enough time elapses before the next feeding. Keep in mind that it takes two to three hours to eliminate one drink. You can also pump your breast milk in advance and give the baby a bottle at the next feeding.

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Moderation is always
in good taste.



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