



Alcohol and pregnancy

Think before
you drink

Alcohol and pregnancy

This guide is for you if you think you might be pregnant now or hope to be in the future.

It is aimed at answering some of the questions you may have about how drinking alcohol during pregnancy might affect your unborn baby. It can support you in making healthier choices.



Can I drink alcohol when I'm pregnant?

The safest approach in pregnancy is to choose not to drink at all. It is important to be aware that when you drink alcohol, your baby also drinks. Your baby's brain and nervous system grow throughout the pregnancy. Harm can happen even when small amounts of alcohol are consumed.

The risk of serious harm to your baby's physical, neurological and mental development increases as you drink more, and binge drinking is especially harmful. This risk relates to a range of conditions known as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD).

What if I have been drinking alcohol before I knew I was pregnant?

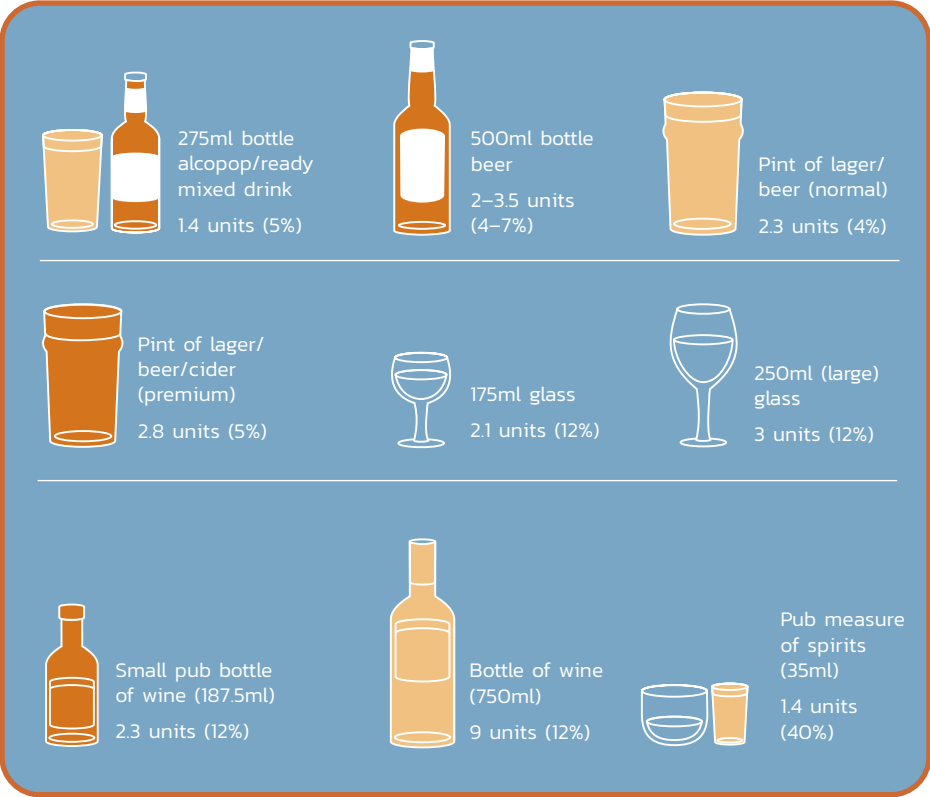
Please be reassured that if you drank small amounts of alcohol around the time of conception there is very little risk of harm to the baby in your womb. A single episode of 'binge drinking' at that stage is less likely to be harmful to the baby (see overleaf for definition of binge drinking).

It is important, however, to be aware that drinking, whether in small amounts, heavily or binge drinking in early pregnancy can be harmful to your baby's development and there is an increased risk of early miscarriage.

Some women may be unaware of their pregnancy for several weeks or months. If you suspect you may be pregnant, avoid drinking alcohol and take a pregnancy test as soon as possible.

Pregnant women should always consult with their health professional if they have any concerns about their alcohol intake.

Binge drinking means drinking lots of alcohol in a short space of time or drinking to get drunk. In the UK, this is defined as drinking 6 units in a single session for women. This is the equivalent of 2 large glasses of wine at 12%ABV.



How does alcohol affect your unborn baby?

Alcohol is a toxic substance. When a pregnant woman drinks alcohol, it passes from her bloodstream through the placenta and into the baby's bloodstream. The placenta is not a filter. The unborn baby does not have a developed liver to process any alcohol.

Drinking alcohol in pregnancy can affect:

- the baby's growth and development in the womb and during his or her entire lifetime;
- the baby's/child's long-term physical and mental health; and
- the child's ability to learn and retain information (learning difficulties).

What does having FASD mean?

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) are a group of conditions resulting from alcohol exposure during pregnancy, leading to lifelong physical, cognitive and behavioural challenges. These can range from mild to severe. FASD can cause a range of problems as the baby develops. Your baby may:

- be born premature
- suffer from seizures
- be born small
- have eating and sleeping problems
- have problems seeing and hearing
- have trouble following directions and learning to do simple tasks
- have trouble with paying attention
- have learning difficulties in school
- have working memory problems

- have trouble getting along with others and controlling their own behaviour
- need medical care all their lives
- need special educational support

Remember FASDs can be 100% preventable by NOT drinking alcohol during your pregnancy.

Further information on Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders is available at www.fasd.ie and <https://nationalfasd.org.uk/>



Tips to take care of you and your baby during pregnancy

- Talk to your midwife or health professional about any concerns you may have.
- Allow time to prepare for parenting.
- Maintain a healthy, alcohol-free social life and keep up your hobbies and interests.

- Explore ways to develop a healthier lifestyle.
- Build a good network of support for you and your family.
- Manage your stress, exercise and eat healthily.
- Choose non-alcoholic alternatives, such as alcohol-free drinks.

Making healthier choices now (or at any time during your pregnancy) will have a positive impact on the physical health and emotional wellbeing of you and your baby.

If you are concerned about your drinking or any aspects of your pregnancy, it is important that you speak to any of the following health professionals:

- GP or family doctor
- midwife
- health visitor
- public health nurse
- obstetrician

You can find help, support and information about substance use services available to you and the referral routes into each service at <https://drugsandalcoholni.info/>

For more information on alcohol and pregnancy, visit:

- The Pregnancy Book
www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/pregnancy-book-0
- www.nhs.uk/pregnancy/keeping-well/drinking-alcohol-while-pregnant/
- www.rcog.org.uk/for-the-public/browse-our-patient-information/alcohol-and-pregnancy/
- www.nhs.uk/pregnancy/your-pregnancy-care/your-antenatal-care/
- <https://pha.site/planning-pregnancy-diet-lifestyle-advice-men-women-youtube>

This leaflet has been adapted from an earlier publication *Alcohol and pregnancy: a pocket guide*, which was produced as part of a collaboration between Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland, the Health Service Executive in the Republic of Ireland, Cooperation and Working Together (CAWT), and Time IVA Change Border Region Alcohol Project in 2014.



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