

April Is Alcohol Awareness Month How Much is Too Much During Pregnancy?

by Kevin Fleishman, M.D.

Q: I just found out that I am pregnant. I am not a heavy drinker, but I do like to have an occasional glass of wine. Will this hurt my unborn baby?

A: Yes, it may harm your unborn child. April is Alcohol Awareness Month and all mothers (even mothers-to-be) need to be aware of the life-long damage they can cause to their babies by drinking alcohol during pregnancy. Drinking alcohol while you are pregnant is a cause of birth defects. It can cause your baby to be born with both physical and mental birth defects. One of the most serious concerns is fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS).

Q. What is fetal alcohol syndrome?

A: FAS is a group of problems found in children born to mothers who drank alcohol during their pregnancies. In the United States, about 2 of every 1,000 babies are born each year with FAS. These babies usually are small and underweight and often have small eyes and small heads. They often experience delayed development, heart defects and vision or hearing problems. At its most serious stage, it can cause mental retardation. In fact, FAS is a cause of mental retardation in the U.S.

Q: Will it hurt my baby if I drink just a little alcohol?

A: Even small amounts of alcohol can be harmful. No one knows exactly how much alcohol a woman has to drink to cause birth defects. Levels may differ from woman to woman. So experts agree that the best advice is to not drink alcohol at all while you are pregnant. This includes beer, wine, wine coolers, liquor, and after-dinner liqueurs.

“Binge drinking” means having three or more drinks at a time and this can be especially dangerous for your baby because it makes the level of alcohol in the blood very high very quickly. So even if you don’t drink every day, you may put your baby at

risk for FAS if you binge drink. Why take the chance that a few moments spent imbibing your favorite beverage could result in life-long challenges for your child?

Q: What if I had an alcoholic drink before I knew I was pregnant? Could that still harm my child?

A: An occasional drink before you found out you were pregnant probably won't harm the baby, but a woman should stop drinking alcohol as soon as she thinks she could be pregnant. The best thing to do is to quit drinking when you are thinking about getting pregnant or if you think you could be pregnant. Substitute water, fruit juices or milk.

Q: What if I can't stop drinking?

A: Be honest with your doctor. Tell him or her how much you are drinking. Your doctor may be able to help you stop drinking or refer you to a program that specializes in treatment for alcohol disorders. Helping you deliver a healthy baby and maintain your own health is our number one concern.

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