



Alcohol, drugs and pregnancy

Pregnant women are encouraged to consume neither alcohol nor other drugs

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Thinking ahead

The birth of a child has a huge effect on the life of its parents and other relatives. Most parents-to-be use pregnancy as an opportunity to prepare their lives and environment to the new circumstances, with the safety of the baby they are responsible for in mind particularly. One of the things that there is reason to consider is parents' consumption of tobacco, alcohol and drugs. Women who are trying to become pregnant should make it a priority to cut down on or stop consuming these substances as they can reduce fertility and increase the risk of miscarriage.

With the baby in mind

A nine month pregnancy is only a short period of a person's life, which is therefore reason for women to enjoy it as best as possible. The most important role of expectant parents is to contribute to the health of the baby that is on the way. A mother's lifestyle – including her diet and consumption habits – can make a great difference for her baby's future and development. Her diet must include all essential nutrients for both mother and child, but it is no less important for her to avoid foods and substances that may be damaging to the foetus she carries. This can be difficult if the lifestyle of close family and relatives is not in keeping with the needs of mother and baby. Their support and willingness to help meet these new needs make a big difference. This is something that needs to be discussed openly within the family.

Is alcohol harmful to the baby?

Yes. When a woman is pregnant, her baby is a part of her. Everything that she eats or drinks is also passed on to the baby, including alcohol. Alcohol that she drinks is carried by the bloodstream through the placenta and umbilical cord to the foetus. Its organs are not sufficiently developed to break down alcohol, meaning that alcohol affects the foetus more than the mother.

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When a pregnancy is detected

An expectant mother should cease consuming alcohol immediately upon discovering that she is pregnant. If this proves difficult for her, it's important to go straight away to the doctor or midwife who is taking care of her. They can give assistance and counsel.

How much alcohol is harmful?

It is neither known how much alcohol is harmful or at what stage of pregnancy the foetus is in the most danger. It is known that so-called moderate drinking can be harmful, and that the risk increases as the amount of alcohol consumed goes up. The foetus is at risk throughout the pregnancy, but the damage depends on what stage of development the brain is at.



The organs develop at various stages of pregnancy, and each organ is most sensitive at the point at which it is growing the fastest. If a pregnant woman doesn't consume alcohol she avoids the risks that accompany the consumption of alcohol.

What can happen?

It is known that heavy alcohol consumption can result in permanent damage such as facial birth defects, unnaturally small heads and, in some cases, heart defects and deformed limbs. These defects are accompanied by mental impairment and impaired cognitive development that do not necessarily emerge until the child is school-aged. These very serious consequences are rare, but it is a fact that many more children have less severe symptoms that emerge in the form of difficulties in school and behaviour problems later in life, even if their mothers did not consume much alcohol during their pregnancies.

Is there a difference between beer, table wine and spirits?

No. The alcohol in all these drinks has the same effect and can harm the foetus.

Definition of one unit of alcohol

The following drinks all contain one unit of alcohol

1. A single measure of spirits
2. A small glass of sherry
3. A small glass of wine
4. 1/4 litre of strong beer
5. 1/2 litre of regular beer

What if the pregnancy is detected late?

Even if a woman consumes alcohol during the first weeks of her pregnancy before realising that she is carrying a child, it's still beneficial for her to stop consumption immediately. It's good to talk with a midwife or doctor if one is concerned because of alcohol or drug use during the first weeks of a pregnancy.

What about illegal drugs?

Illegal drugs (such as hash, e-pills, amphetamines, cocaine and heroine) can cause miscarriage or complications such as abruptio placentae and premature birth if a pregnant woman uses them. There is also a risk that cognitive development will be impaired and that the baby will suffer from various serious conditions that require a great deal of supervision and care. A woman who uses illegal drugs must cease to do so as soon as she discovers that she is pregnant. She should not hesitate to seek the help, counsel and support of the doctor or midwife who is looking after her.

Does the father's alcohol or drug consumption have an effect on the baby?

It has been neither possible to prove nor disprove that a father's consumption has a biological effect on the foetus. However, it's easier for an expectant mother to stop consuming alcohol and other drugs if her partner supports her by doing so as well. A father's lifestyle also has an enormous social and emotional impact on the lives of mother and baby.



Is there an increased risk of miscarriage for women who consume alcohol during pregnancy?

Yes, there is an increased risk of miscarriage for women who drink more than three alcohol units per week.

Is the baby harmed if the mother drinks only on festive occasions?

It's best to never drink during pregnancy. It is the proportion of alcohol in the blood that makes the most difference. The baby is affected more by the alcohol than the mother, and it takes longer for the baby to rid itself of the alcohol, whether a mother drinks a large amount on rare occasions or a small amount frequently.

Should pregnant women cease taking medication?

It's best for women who are on medication for a condition or disease to consult with a doctor whether there is reason to change medication or dosage during pregnancy. As a general rule, it's best not to take medication during pregnancy, and an expectant mother should always announce that she is pregnant if a doctor intends to prescribe medication for her.

Is it healthy to drink red wine during pregnancy because it is rich in iron?

No, the alcohol in all alcoholic drinks has the same effect and can harm the foetus. Better sources of iron include red meat, breakfast cereals, dried fruits, whole grain bread and dark-green vegetables. (More information in **Diet and pregnancy**, 2nd ed. 2006)

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Breastfeeding and alcohol

It is best to severely limit alcohol consumption during the period when a baby is breastfed. A strong, unique bond is formed between mother and baby during breastfeeding. If the mother drinks alcohol, some of the alcohol will be passed on to the baby, who will be more affected by it than she. The baby's nervous system is still being formed and can still be damaged by the alcohol. A single alcoholic drink decreases the amount of milk produced, changes the smell and taste of the milk (making it unpalatable to the child) and has a mildly disorienting effect, weakening its suckling reflex. A mother under the influence of alcohol is also not as alert as she would otherwise be, increasing the risk of accidents.

For further information

A list of places where it is possible to seek more information:

The Prenatal Care Centre. Telephone: 585 1400

<http://www.hr.is>

Health care clinics and health centres around the country.

The Public Health Institute of Iceland. Telephone: 5 800 900

<http://www.lydheilsustod.is>

The Directorate of Health. Telephone: 510 1900

<http://www.landlaeknir.is>



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Enjoy your pregnancy

Eat good and nutritious food.

Exercise regularly, and choose the form of exercise you like best.

Avoid alcohol. Drink water, fruit juice or other non-alcoholic beverages instead with meals, at parties and when you relax with your friends.

Find ways of relaxing that suit you and that you can fit into your daily life, such as reading, music, meditation, aerobics, walking/hiking or baths.

Do something special for yourself or your child – something you find enjoyable.

Remind yourself how well you feel and how much safer the baby you are carrying is without being exposed to tobacco, alcohol or other drugs.

Make use of Prenatal Care services (mæðravernd).

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