

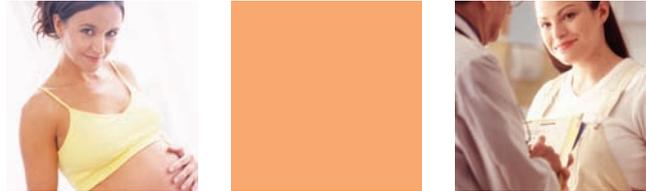


ALCOHOL AND HEALTH

PREGNANCY AND DRINKING: YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED



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INTRODUCTION

Éduc'alcool is an independent, not-for-profit organization whose sole mission is to improve the relationship between Quebecers and alcohol.

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 *Collège des médecins du Québec*. 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 was printed seven times. It is a synthesis of information provided by doctors Harry Bard, neonatologist at Sainte-Justine Hospital, Marie-Chantal Lemonnier, obstetrician-gynecologist 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, Ph.D, titular professor at the University of Montréal.

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



**PREGNANCY AND DRINKING:
YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED**

1 My husband 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 fetal 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 142 ml/5-ounce glass of wine, has any harmful effects. However, we can't rule out the possibility that this conclusion is the result of 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 fetus. The safest option is not drinking at all; at the very least, you should cut down on your drinking.

3 What do you mean by "one drink"?

One drink is 341 ml/12 oz of beer (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 with 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 development of the fetus, even though there is no evidence that the occasional drink has any harmful effect. 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. The scientific community believes that 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 fetus?

Yes. A pregnant woman who frequently drinks a lot is more likely to give birth to a child with specific problems, known collectively as "fetal alcohol spectrum disorders." 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 expert in the field 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 fetus in the same way?

No. The risk to the fetus is reduced considerably 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, tobacco and drug use during pregnancy all have an impact.

7 **Why is alcohol bad for the baby?**

Alcohol is a toxic substance that is quickly transferred from the mother's bloodstream to the baby's. Because all the organs of the fetus 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 and beer are less damaging to the fetus than “hard liquor” (spirits)?**

No. As we said in the answer to question 3, a standard serving of each contains the same amount of alcohol. The alcohol may pass more slowly from the mother's bloodstream to the baby's if she eats before drinking.

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

Nursing mothers must think about their own well-being and the baby's. It's important to eat a balanced diet and get plenty of rest. And you should avoid drinking while actually breast-feeding, because the baby will absorb alcohol, too. It's fine to drink moderately, on occasion (not more than two drinks), provided enough time elapses before the next feeding: it takes about two hours for the body to eliminate the alcohol in one drink. If you are using bottles, another option is to pump your breast milk before you drink alcohol, and use that milk for the baby's next feeding.



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The reports in Éduc'alcool's Alcohol and Health series are well-researched and easy to read. Each one gets straight to the point and is a valuable health, education and information resource. All of them may be downloaded from the Éduc'alcool website educalcool.qc.ca or ordered by calling 1-888-ALCOOL1.



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A review of the research on how moderate, regular alcohol consumption affects human health.



THE EFFECTS OF EARLY ALCOHOL USE

Examines the harmful effects of early alcohol use and explains the basic reasons why young people should not have unrestricted access to alcohol.



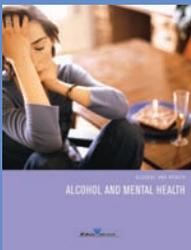
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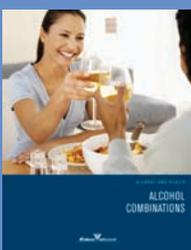
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