

Pregnancy and alcohol



**ALCOHOL
KNOW YOUR
LIMITS**

AVOID ALCOHOL IF YOU
ARE PREGNANT OR
TRYING TO CONCEIVE.
NEVER MORE THAN
1-2 UNITS ONCE OR
TWICE A WEEK.

Does having a baby mean not having a drink?

Just because you're pregnant, your life doesn't need to be on hold. You still see the same people and do the same things – which, for many of us, includes having a drink. But things aren't quite so straightforward now. You know that everything you eat and drink can affect your baby. But should you stop drinking for the entire nine months? Or is there such a thing as a 'safe' alcohol limit?

This booklet offers information about drinking – when you're trying to conceive, during pregnancy, and while breastfeeding – so you can decide what's best for you and your baby.

Did you know that alcohol can act as a poison, as well as being addictive. Alcohol in a foetus has a toxic effect on developing cells and organs, especially in the brain, where it kills cells.

Pregnancy and alcohol

How does alcohol affect your unborn baby?

When you drink, alcohol reaches your baby through the placenta. But the baby cannot process it as fast as you can, and is exposed to greater amounts of alcohol for longer than you are. And too much exposure to alcohol can seriously affect the baby's development.

Because of the risk, pregnant women or women trying to conceive should avoid drinking alcohol. If you do choose to drink, to protect the baby, you should not drink more than one to two units of alcohol once or twice a week and you should not get drunk.

Additional advice from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) advises women to avoid alcohol in the first three months in particular, because of the increased risk of miscarriage.

Women

Should not regularly drink more than 2–3 units a day

Pregnant women and women trying to conceive

**Should avoid alcohol altogether
Never more than 1–2 units once or twice a week**

Conception



Did you know it's safer to avoid alcohol if you are trying to get pregnant?

How much can I drink?

Nobody really knows how much alcohol is 'safe' to drink before your chances of conceiving are reduced. But we do know that heavy drinking can disrupt menstrual cycles, and that women who drink heavily can find it harder to get pregnant.

If you are trying for a baby, it's advisable to avoid alcohol. If you choose to drink, you should drink no more than one to two units, once or twice a week. There are simple steps you can take and organisations that can help you. See page 8 'If you want to cut down', for details.

Should the father stop drinking?

There are good reasons why the father might decide to avoid drinking excessively if you are trying for a baby:

- alcohol kills sperm, and excess alcohol can make a man less fertile
- heavy drinking can cause temporary impotence.

In short, you have less chance of becoming pregnant if the father drinks too much. And while you may not want to make him stop, you can help make sure he knows the facts.

How will drinking affect my baby?

Many women go off the taste of alcohol when they're pregnant. But if you're not one of them, and are wondering if it's okay to have a drink, here are the facts.



Spirit double
50ml measure
2 units
ABV 40%



Alcopop
275ml bottle
1.4 units
ABV 5%



Shot 25ml
measure
1 unit
ABV 40%

When you're pregnant



Did you know that drinking alcohol whilst pregnant can damage your unborn baby?

The effects of alcohol

When you drink, alcohol passes from your blood, through the placenta, to your baby. A baby's liver is one of the last organs to develop fully and does not mature until the latter half of pregnancy. Therefore, your baby cannot process alcohol as well as you can, and is exposed to greater amounts of alcohol for longer periods of time.

Alcohol is not just dangerous for the baby in the first three months. If you drink heavily during pregnancy, a particular group of problems could develop, known as Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS).

Children with this syndrome have:

- restricted growth
- facial abnormalities
- learning and behavioural disorders.

Regular ongoing drinking in pregnancy above the levels recommended by the NHS, as well as binge drinking, may be associated with lesser forms of the full FAS.

The risks of heavy drinking during pregnancy

Heavy drinking during all three stages of pregnancy can result in problems:

First trimester (months 0–3)

- damage to developing organs and nervous system, resulting in later mental and physical problems
- major structural abnormalities
- spontaneous miscarriage.

Second trimester (months 3–6)

- continued risk of damage to the central nervous system
- continued risk of miscarriage.

Third trimester (months 6–9)

- disruption to general growth and development
- dulled mental abilities
- minor abnormalities
- low birth-weight.

“I went out drinking a couple of times before I knew I was pregnant. I was worried I might have harmed my baby so I talked to my doctor. I then made sure I was extra careful during the rest of my pregnancy.”

It may be that you weren't actually trying for a baby, but have conceived by accident. If this has happened to you, you should avoid alcohol as soon as you find out you are pregnant and talk to your GP or midwife.

The facts about breastfeeding and alcohol

How will drinking affect my baby?

Be assured that by breastfeeding, you're giving your baby the best possible start in life. It's very unlikely that having an occasional drink will harm you or your baby.

However, we do know that alcohol passes through to the baby in very small amounts in your breast milk. Because of this, if you are breastfeeding it is advisable to keep your drinking within the limits recommended for pregnant women. If you regularly drink more than this amount, it can affect your baby in a number of ways:

- your milk may smell different and put your baby off feeding
- the alcohol may make your baby too sleepy to feed
- the baby may have difficulties with digestion and problems with his or her sleeping patterns.

Breastfeeding and alcohol tips:

- if it's a special occasion and you know you're going to be drinking, consider expressing milk in advance
- to reduce the exposure of your baby to alcohol, avoid breastfeeding 2 to 3 hours after drinking.

Can I minimise the effects of a drink?

- avoid drinking just before you feed
- have your drink after the last feed of the day – if you can predict when that will be!

As well as being a time of joy and excitement, the first few months after giving birth can also be difficult and demanding. Sleep deprivation, endless feeding and changing routines, emotional ups and downs, can leave you feeling tired and drained. But heavy drinking will leave you feeling a whole lot worse.

Although it may help you feel more relaxed at first, drinking too much at this time will make you more irritable and low. This will make it harder to cope with the constant attention that your baby needs.



Did you know that a 250ml glass of wine (ABV 12%) contains 3 units of alcohol and that one unit of alcohol takes about two hours to clear from a mother's milk?



Sparkling wine
175ml glass
1.9 units

ABV 11%



Wine
250ml glass
3 units

ABV 12%



Wine
750ml bottle
9.8 units

ABV 13%

If you want to cut down

Drinking is often a big part of what we do to have fun – to relax after a long day, to be with friends, to meet new people or to celebrate. For many women, one of the greatest changes they make when pregnant is to do with drinking.

Where to get help

If you think you are drinking too much, you may well be able to cut down on your own using the tips on page 12. If you find it difficult to go it alone or are getting withdrawal symptoms, plenty of help and support is available. Try:

- talking to your midwife
- visiting your GP
- checking out www.nhs.uk/units

If you think you may have a problem with your drinking, visit your GP or call 0800 917 8282 (textphone 0800 027 4114) for advice and details of local support.

If you are a heavy drinker and might suffer alcohol withdrawal symptoms, NEVER stop drinking suddenly. Instead, cut down a little and get immediate medical advice.

Choices

If you are at a party or out with friends while pregnant, you should avoid alcohol. If you choose to drink, you should:

- choose a low alcoholic drink
- dilute wine with water or soda and make it last longer.



Lager pint
2.8 units

ABV 5%



Beer pint
2.3 units

ABV 4%



Cider pint
3.4 units

ABV 6%



Did you know that a double gin and tonic contains 2 units of alcohol? And that it is best not to sleep in the same bed as your baby if you have been drinking alcohol?

Know your units

'LOW ALCOHOL' DRINKS

	Bottle (330ml)	Can (440ml)	Pint (568ml)	Litre
Beer, Lager & Cider at 2%	0.7 units	0.9 units	1.1 units	2 units

BEER, LAGER & CIDER

	Bottle (330ml)	Can (440ml)	Pint (568ml)	Litre
4%	1.3 units	1.8 units	2.3 units	4 units
5%	1.7 units	2.2 units	2.8 units	5 units
6%	2 units	2.6 units	3.4 units	6 units

'SUPER-STRENGTH' DRINKS

	Bottle (330ml)	Can (440ml)	Pint (568ml)	Litre
Beer, Lager & Cider at 9%	3 units	4 units	5.1 units	9 units

ALCOPOPS (5%)

Bottle (275ml)

1.4 units

SPIRITS (38–40%)

	Small measure (25ml)	Large measure (35ml)	Small double measure (50ml)	Large double measure (70ml)
Gin, rum, vodka & whisky	1 unit	1.3–1.4 units	1.9–2 units	2.7–2.8 units

The NHS recommends that:

- men should not regularly drink more than 3–4 units of alcohol a day
 - women should not regularly drink more than 2–3 units of alcohol a day.
- ‘Regularly’ means drinking every day or most days of the week.

Women should avoid drinking if they are pregnant or trying to conceive. If they do choose to drink, to protect the baby, they should not drink more than 1 to 2 units of alcohol once or twice a week and should not get drunk.

The table below provides information on the number of units contained in some common drinks, based on typical

alcoholic strengths. The ABV (alcohol by volume) shows what percentage of a drink is pure alcohol – the higher the percentage, the stronger the drink. Check labels – increasingly bottles and cans show the number of units they contain. Or ask bar staff to identify the actual ABV % strength of what you are drinking, because different brands may be stronger or weaker than the examples given below.

To keep track of the units in your favourite drinks, visit www.nhs.uk/units Then you can easily keep count and make informed choices when you’re out drinking.

SHOTS (38–40%)	Small measure (25ml)	Large measure (35ml)
Tequila		
Sambuca	1 unit	1.3–1.4 units

Shots may either be spirits or liqueurs, and are generally drunk very quickly. Different liqueurs can vary considerably in strength – they can be stronger or weaker than this example.

WINE & CHAMPAGNE	Small glass (125ml)	Standard glass (175ml)	Large glass (250ml)	Bottle (750ml)
(red, white, rose or sparkling)				
10%	1.25 units	1.75 units	2.5 units	7.5 units
11%	1.4 units	1.9 units	2.8 units	8.3 units
12%	1.5 units	2.1 units	3 units	9 units
13%	1.6 units	2.3 units	3.3 units	9.8 units
14%	1.75 units	2.5 units	3.5 units	10.5 units

FORTIFIED WINE (17.5–20%)	Standard measure (50ml)
Sherry & port	0.9–1 unit

How to cut down

10 ways to cut down your drinking before, during and after pregnancy

- 1 Reduce your units by choosing drinks that are not so strong.
- 2 Don't let people 'top you up'.
- 3 Drink water before you go out.
- 4 Drink slowly and avoid rounds.
- 5 Have more water or soft drinks than alcoholic ones.
- 6 Suggest that you meet friends or colleagues at a cafe rather than a bar.
- 7 Replace drinking with other stress-reducing pleasures – have a relaxing bath, do some exercise, read, or listen to music.
- 8 Invite friends round to your home instead of going out.
- 9 Switch to non-alcoholic versions of your favourite drinks – a Virgin Mary or a fruit juice cocktail.
- 10 If your partner enjoys a drink after work, consider asking him/her not to, so you don't feel deprived.

Top tips

If you are pregnant or trying to conceive, you should avoid alcohol. If you choose to drink, the NHS recommends that you:

- drink only once, or at most twice, a week**
- have no more than one or two units each time**
- do not get drunk.**



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