



Why do girls and women drink alcohol during pregnancy?



Information for Service Providers

“It is safest not to drink alcohol during pregnancy.” Yet, 13% of women in Manitoba continue to drink after learning they are pregnant. Many service providers struggle to understand why a woman drinks during pregnancy.

6 Reasons Why Girls & Women May Drink During Pregnancy

1. Women are unaware they are pregnant.

Approximately 50% of pregnancies are unplanned. In Manitoba, 14% of women report drinking alcohol before knowing they were pregnant. Most (87%) women stop drinking when they learn they are pregnant. It is important to have conversations with women about alcohol use before they become pregnant.

2. Women are unaware of the extent of damage alcohol can cause the fetus or they believe that their pattern of use is safe.

While Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder is the leading known cause of developmental disability, the range of harms of alcohol during pregnancy is still debated in the media and science has yet to determine all the factors that affect how alcohol can affect a developing fetus.

3. Women underestimate the harms alcohol consumption can cause because they know other women who drank during pregnancy and their children appear healthy.

While many women are aware of the possible harms of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, the effects can be varied, invisible, and only apparent years down the road.

4. Alcohol use is the norm in their social group and abstaining may therefore be difficult.

For some women, it can be hard to abstain when it's expected that they drink, especially if people don't yet know they are pregnant. Alcohol use is often an integral part of business networking, socializing, and relationships.

5. Women may be using alcohol to cope with difficult life situations such as violence, depression, poverty, or isolation.

Many women can find it difficult to stop drinking when their life circumstances remain challenging during pregnancy or if they have few alternatives for finding support and treatment. In Manitoba, 23% of women who drank alcohol during pregnancy reported having depression.

6. Women may struggle with alcohol addiction.

Addiction spans all segments of society and can be a concern long before pregnancy. In some cases, pregnancy can be an opportunity to address addictions issues, but in other cases, harm reduction approaches should be considered until a woman is ready to address her addiction.

Research shows that drinking alcohol during pregnancy is most consistently predicted by:

1) how much women drank before they were pregnant; and 2) being in an abusive relationship.

Adapted with permission from the BC Centre of Excellence for Women's Health. For more information on their work visit www.cewh.ca.

To read a short information package on this topic which includes information on what you can do to help as a service provider, where to make a referral in Manitoba, and much more, visit manitoba.ca/fs/fasd/resources.html