

The facts about...

# Alcohol and **Reproduction**

for the facts  
**drinkaware.co.uk**

**Five key  
things you  
need to  
know**

**Even small amounts of alcohol can interfere with our reproductive systems. The more you drink, the greater the effect it can have on your fertility - and this applies to men and women.**

While many of alcohol's effects on reproduction are temporary, continuing to regularly drink over the government's lower-risk guidelines can lead to serious infertility problems. And the drinking you do in your late teens and early twenties can affect your fertility later in life.

So, if you're thinking of starting a family it's time to keep an eye on what you're drinking.

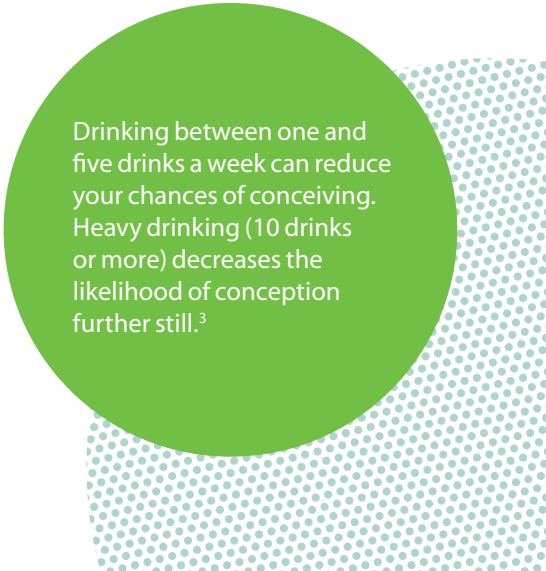
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## Drinking can make women less fertile

Alcohol can affect men's and women's reproductive systems, and damage fertility. For women it causes imbalances in the hormonal system that controls reproduction. Even small amounts of alcohol can affect a woman's menstrual cycle and reduce the chance of conceiving.

Long-term heavy drinking can cause women to have irregular periods or stop ovulating. Periods can stop altogether or menopause can occur earlier. Heavy drinkers who do become pregnant are more likely to have a miscarriage.<sup>1</sup>

Although alcohol can inhibit fertility, it is certainly not a form of contraception: drunken one-night stands can and do lead to unwanted pregnancies. 'Binge' drinking (consuming more than eight units in a single session for men, or more than six units for women) may also increase the likelihood of having unprotected sex and getting sexually transmitted infections including Chlamydia, which in turn can cause infertility.<sup>2</sup>



Drinking between one and five drinks a week can reduce your chances of conceiving. Heavy drinking (10 drinks or more) decreases the likelihood of conception further still.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. 'Alcohol and Hormones' Alcohol Alert.

<sup>2</sup> Davies C, Tucker L, Sheron N. (2007) 'Binge drinking, sexual behaviour and sexually transmitted infection in the UK' International Journal of STD and AIDS 18:810—813.

<sup>3</sup> Koldjensen, T et al. (1998) 'Does moderate alcohol consumption affect fertility?' British Medical Journal no. 307, pp. 505-510.

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## Alcohol affects male fertility too

It's not just women who need to worry about alcohol and fertility. Alcohol can reduce a man's testosterone levels, leading to loss of libido. It can also damage the quality, structure and movement of sperm by stopping the liver from properly metabolising vitamin A, which is needed for sperm development.<sup>4</sup>

Alcohol is toxic to the testes. This can harm sperm when they're produced and stop them developing properly or reaching the egg.



<sup>4</sup> Leo, MA et al. (1982) 'Hepatic vitamin A depletion in alcoholic liver injury' New England Journal of Medicine vol. 307, no. 10, pp.597-601.

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## The healthiest option is not to drink when you're trying to conceive

Official advice issued via the Department of Health is that women trying to conceive should avoid alcohol altogether. If a woman trying to conceive does choose to drink, the government's advice is not to have more than one to two units of alcohol once or twice a week (two units is equivalent to a 175 ml glass of 13% wine), and not to get drunk.

Some medical evidence suggests that drinking alcohol can reduce your chances of getting pregnant. But another very important reason for avoiding alcohol while you're trying to conceive is that alcohol can have a particularly damaging effect on your baby in the very early stages of pregnancy – before you even know you're pregnant. The only way to avoid this risk is to stop drinking before you start trying for a baby.

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) is the organisation responsible for providing national guidance on promoting good health and preventing and treating ill health.

NICE additionally advises that the risks of miscarriage in the first three months of pregnancy mean that it is particularly important for women not to drink alcohol at all during that period.



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## Heavy drinking now can affect fertility later

Many of alcohol's effects on reproduction are temporary, and the reproductive system will return to normal when you stop drinking. But continuing to regularly drink over the lower-risk guidelines can lead to serious infertility problems for both men and women. This includes heavy drinking in your late teens and early twenties.

In men, excessive long-term alcohol consumption can result in testosterone deficiency and shrink the testicles. This can lead to impotence, sterility, growth of breasts, loss of facial and body hair, and growth around the hips.




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## If you drink when you're pregnant, your baby is at risk of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) and other health problems

If you drink alcohol when you're pregnant, it passes to your unborn baby across the placenta to the foetus via the bloodstream. Your unborn baby's liver isn't fully formed, so it can't metabolise (break down) the alcohol quickly enough. High blood alcohol concentration in a foetus means it lacks the oxygen and nutrients needed for its brain and organs to grow properly.

This can affect a baby's development, leading to Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD), an umbrella term for life-long alcohol-related conditions caused by alcohol exposure before birth. These include facial deformities, poor memory or a short attention span and mental health problems, such as alcohol or drug addiction.<sup>6</sup>

Miscarriage, stillbirth, premature birth and small birth weight are other conditions associated with a mother's binge drinking – consuming more than six units on one occasion.



Experts estimate that in Western countries, one child in 100 is born with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder as a result of their mother's heavy drinking while pregnant.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Hospital Episode Statistics (HES) website, Pregnant Women and Alcohol. Available at <http://www.hesonline.nhs.uk/Ease/servlet/ContentServer?siteID=1937&categoryID=945>

<sup>6</sup> From Drinkaware interview with Dr Raja Mukherjee of the Surrey and Borders Partnership NHS Foundation Trust.



## Staying in control

The government advises that people should not regularly drink more than the daily unit guidelines of 3–4 units of alcohol for men (equivalent to a pint and a half of 4% beer) and 2–3 units of alcohol for women (equivalent to a 175 ml glass of 13% wine). 'Regularly' means drinking every day or most days of the week.

However, the Department of Health recommends that pregnant women, or women trying for a baby, should avoid alcohol altogether. If they do choose to drink, to minimise risk to the baby, the government's advice is to not have more than one to two units of alcohol once or twice a week, and not to get drunk.



Here are a couple of ways to keep your drinking under control if you're trying for a baby:

**A Start slowly.**

If you are trying to conceive, try cutting down your units gradually. Start off by reducing your drinking each day, and then try having a few alcohol-free days a week.

**B Get support.**

Ask your partner to help you by cutting down their drinking as well. If you are trying to conceive this is vital, as drinking affects both of your bodies.

**C Stand firm.**

If you're out with friends or colleagues, you may be under pressure to drink, especially if you haven't told anyone that you are trying for a baby. Tell them you're driving, on a health kick, or simply stick to soft drinks.

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# We've got the answers at **drinkaware.co.uk**

## Advice

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## Further information

For the facts on alcohol and to keep track of your units through our MyDrinkaware tool, visit the Drinkaware website [drinkaware.co.uk](http://drinkaware.co.uk)

If you are concerned about the effects of alcohol on your fertility and sexual health, you can talk confidentially to Drinkline on 0800 917 8282. Your GP will also be able to offer more information and advice.

The Family Planning Association can give you information, advice and support on sexual health, sex and relationships. Visit their website at [www.fpa.org.uk](http://www.fpa.org.uk)

The FASD Trust operates a helpline for parents and carers of children with FASD. Call 01608 811 599 or visit [www.fasdtrust.co.uk](http://www.fasdtrust.co.uk)

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