

# Pregnancy and Alcohol

If you are pregnant, or are trying to become pregnant, you should limit the amount of alcohol you drink to no more 1-2 drinks (1-2 units), once or twice a week.

## Why should I limit the amount I drink when I am pregnant?

If you have one or two drinks of alcohol (one or two units), once or twice a week, it is unlikely to harm your unborn baby. However, the amount of alcohol that is definitely safe in pregnancy is not known. So, many women have little or no alcohol when they are pregnant. The very early stages of pregnancy may be the most vulnerable time. This is why it is just as important to limit alcohol when you are trying to become pregnant.

If you drink heavily you have an increased risk of miscarriage. Also, alcohol can cause serious harm to the baby's growth and brain development. For example, studies have shown that:

- Pregnant women who drink more than 15 units a week have an increased risk of having a baby with a low birth weight.
- Pregnant women who drink more than 20 units a week have an increased risk of having a baby with some damage to the brain causing impaired intellect.
- Pregnant women who drink very heavily risk having a baby with 'Fetal Alcohol Syndrome'. Babies with this syndrome have brain damage, a low birth weight, and facial malformations.

## What is a unit of alcohol?

One unit of alcohol is 10 ml (1 cl) by volume, or 8 g by weight, of pure alcohol. For example:

- One unit of alcohol is about equal to:
  - Half a pint of ordinary strength beer, lager, or cider (3–4% alcohol by volume), or
  - A small pub measure (25 ml) of spirits (40% alcohol by volume), or
  - A standard pub measure (50 ml) of fortified wine such as sherry or port (20% alcohol by volume).
- There are one and a half units of alcohol in:
  - A small glass (125 ml) of ordinary strength wine (12% alcohol by volume), or
  - A standard pub measure (35 ml) of spirits (40% alcohol by volume).

Note: using the above 'rough guide' it is easy to underestimate how much alcohol that is in a drink. This is because many beers are now strong, and wines are often served in 175ml glasses. Many wines are also stronger than standard (some contain 13-15% alcohol by volume).

## Further information

If you find it difficult to cut down or stop drinking alcohol, then seek advice and help from your practice nurse, midwife or GP.

There are other leaflets in this series called *Alcohol - Recommended Limits*, *Alcohol and Liver Disease*, *Alcohol and Sensible Drinking*, *Alcoholism and Problem Drinking*.

**Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Aware UK** - [www.fasaware.co.uk](http://www.fasaware.co.uk)

A website designed to raise awareness, give informed choice, provide information and support for people affected by, or interested in, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome.