

**HOW MUCH  
IS TOO MUCH  
WHEN YOU'RE  
HAVING A BABY?**

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### Did you know?

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.

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## 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.

## 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.

These are the NHS recommended maximum allowances for adults:

- women should not regularly drink more than 2–3 units of alcohol a day
- pregnant women should avoid alcohol. If they choose to drink, they should drink no more than 1–2 units of alcohol once or twice a week
- men should not regularly drink more than 3–4 units of alcohol a day.



### WOMEN

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

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### PREGNANT WOMEN

Avoid alcohol altogether. Never more than 1–2 units once or twice a week.

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See pages 6/7 for more information on alcohol units and limits

# Conception



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**Did you know?** If you do choose to drink while pregnant, don't think of units in the same way you might think of calories and 'save them up'. For example, if you didn't drink at all last week, that doesn't mean you can safely drink a lot this week. The advice is clear – you should not drink more than one or two units once or twice a week throughout pregnancy.

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## 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 10 'If you want to cut down', for details.

## Should my partner stop drinking?

There are good reasons why your partner 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 your partner 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.

# When you're pregnant

## 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 on-going 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 1–3)

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

### Second trimester (months 4–6)

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

### Third trimester (months 7–9)

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

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**"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."**

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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.

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# How many units am I drinking?

Here's a guide to the most popular drinks and their alcohol unit content.

## Beer, ale and stout

	Bottle (330ml)	Can (440ml)	Pint
<b>Ordinary strength</b> (3.5 – 4%) (John Smith's, Boddington's, Guinness)	1.3 units	1.8 units	2.3 units
<b>Premium strength</b> (5%)	1.6 units	2.2 units	2.8 units
<b>Strong</b> (6%+)	2 units+	2.6 units+	3.4 units+

## Cider

	Bottle (330ml)	Can (440ml)	Pint	Litre
<b>Ordinary strength</b> (6%) (Dry Blackthorn, Strongbow)	2 units	2.6 units	3.4 units	6 units
<b>Strong</b> (9%+)	3 units+	4 units+	5 units+	9 units+

## Lager

	Bottle (330ml)	Can (440ml)	Pint
<b>Ordinary strength</b> (3.5 – 4%) (Carling Black Label, Fosters)	1.3 units	1.8 units	2.3 units
<b>Premium strength</b> (5%) (Stella Artois, Carlsberg Export, Grolsch, Kronenbourg 1664)	2 units	2.2 units	3 units
<b>Super strength</b> (9%+) (Tennent's Super, Special Brew)	3 units+	4 units+	5 units+

## Alcopops

	1 bottle (275ml)
<b>Ordinary strength</b> (5%) (Smirnoff Ice, Bacardi Breezer, WKD, Reef)	1.4 units

## Shots

	Small measure (25ml)	Large measure (35ml)
<b>Tequila, Sambuca</b>	1 unit	1.3 units

## Spirits

	Small measure (25ml)	Large measure (35ml)	Small double measure (50ml)	Large double measure (70ml)
<b>Gin, rum, vodka &amp; whisky</b>	1 unit	1.4 units	2 units	2.8 units

## Wine (red or white)

	Standard glass (175ml)	Large glass (250ml)	Bottle (750ml)
11%	1.9 units	2.8 units	8.3 units
12%	2.1 units	3 units	9 units
13%	2.3 units	3.3 units	9.8 units
14%	2.5 units	3.5 units	10.5 units

## Fortified wine

	Standard measure (50ml)	1 unit
<b>Sherry &amp; port</b>		

# 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.

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## Did you know?

**One unit of alcohol takes about two hours to clear from a mother's milk.**

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## 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.



# If you want to cut down



For many women, one of the greatest changes they make when having a baby is to do with drinking. 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. Giving all that up can be hard.

## 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 the facing page. 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.drinkaware.co.uk](http://www.drinkaware.co.uk)
- log onto Alcohol Concern's sites [www.downyourdrink.org.uk](http://www.downyourdrink.org.uk) or [www.howsyourdrink.org.uk](http://www.howsyourdrink.org.uk)

If you think you may have a problem with your drinking:

- go to your local alcohol help centre – look in the phone book, or call Drinkline on **0800 917 82 82**

## 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.

# How to do it

## 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 not to, so you don't feel deprived.



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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