

ABC Alcohol for Pregnancy – A guide for health professionals

*There is no known safe level of alcohol use in pregnancy. Women are advised to stop drinking if they could be pregnant, are pregnant or are trying to get pregnant.*¹

All women of childbearing age, whether they are pregnant or not, should be routinely asked about alcohol use, advised on the consequences of alcohol use during pregnancy and supported to stop drinking alcohol when pregnant or planning pregnancy. *ABC Alcohol for Pregnancy* provides a practical guide to help primary care health professionals address alcohol use in pregnancy.

ABC Alcohol for Pregnancy involves the following three steps:

A - Ask all women of childbearing age and pregnant women about their alcohol use and assess and record their alcohol use and level of risk.

For women who are not pregnant - Ask about alcohol use as part of a broader health check and reassess regularly. It is good practice to routinely ask all women about their alcohol use to enable advice and intervention, where needed.

For women who are pregnant - Alcohol use should be assessed at the initial visit and routinely thereafter. Women may not reveal their alcohol use the first time they are asked and they may not stop drinking straight away so it is important to have this conversation more than once.

For all women:

- Use a non-judgemental, empathetic approach to create a safe environment for women to disclose alcohol use.
- Use a validated screening tool such as Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test - Consumption (AUDIT-C) for a quick assessment of how much and how often a woman is drinking.

- Use a standard drinks guide to assist with accurate recall of the number of alcoholic drinks consumed.
- Record information obtained about a woman's alcohol use before and during pregnancy. This helps prompt follow-up conversations and may at a later date support accurate diagnosis of fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) if there are any concerns with a child.

B - Give Brief advice to women of childbearing age and pregnant women that it is important to stop drinking alcohol if they are pregnant or trying to get pregnant and explain why.

Key messages -

- **There is no known safe time to drink alcohol during pregnancy.** Alcohol can affect the development of a baby's brain and central nervous system throughout pregnancy, including around the time of conception.
- **There is no known safe amount of alcohol that can be drunk in pregnancy.** Frequent heavy drinking is known to harm a developing baby but it is not known how much alcohol it takes to cause damage.
- **A baby is not protected from alcohol by the placenta.** Alcohol passes freely through the placenta and reaches concentrations in the baby's blood that can be as high as those in the mother.
- **The consequences of a woman drinking alcohol while pregnant can include** miscarriage, stillbirth, premature birth, low birthweight and a child being born with lifelong mental, physical, behavioural and learning disabilities (FASD).

¹ This advice is supported by the Ministry of Health, the Health Promotion Agency, the Royal New Zealand College of General Practitioners, the New Zealand College of Midwives and other health sector agencies (alcoholpregnancy.org.nz).

For women who are not planning pregnancy - Advise the importance of:

- using effective contraception to avoid unintended pregnancy
- stopping drinking alcohol if they think they might be pregnant to avoid their baby being exposed to alcohol in the first weeks of pregnancy.

For women who are planning pregnancy - Advise the importance of stopping drinking alcohol in advance to avoid their baby being exposed to alcohol in the early weeks before pregnancy is recognised.

For women who are pregnant and have been drinking alcohol - Advise that:

- it is never too late to stop – stopping drinking alcohol at any time during pregnancy is best for their baby
- not all babies exposed to alcohol during pregnancy will be affected
- you are happy to discuss any concerns they might have, including any concerns once the baby is born.

For women who indicate that they will continue to drink during their pregnancy:

- Use motivational interview techniques to help increase a woman's readiness to stop drinking.
- Provide advice on where to find further information and support, including how to self-refer to specialist services for help with stopping drinking while pregnant (see next column).
- Involve a woman's partner and family to support her to stop drinking during her pregnancy.
- Ask about progress with drinking at future visits.

C - Refer to **Counselling** if women need more support than you can provide because they are pregnant and finding it difficult to stop drinking. Refer to a specialist in your service if you have one or to a specialist addiction service.

- **The Alcohol Drug Helpline** can provide an intermediary service between primary care health professionals and specialist addiction services and may be a preferred option for support for some women. The Helpline is staffed by trained brief

intervention counsellors and offers free, confidential information, help and support. Women can ring the free helpline **0800 787 797**, free text adh to **234** or access the website **alcoholdrughelp.org.nz** for information and advice on how to self-refer to a service.

- Information for health professionals about specialist addiction services and the referral process can also be found on the Alcohol Drug Helpline website **alcoholdrughelp.org.nz/directory**.
- Depending on the specialist addiction service, referral can be self-referral or from a health professional or a non-health agency. For preferential referral, it is useful to inform the service that the referral is for a pregnant woman.

Further information and resources for health professionals

Alcohol and pregnancy information and resources, including information about the Health Promotion Agency's 'Don't know? Don't drink' campaign, available from **alcoholpregnancy.org.nz**.

Alcohol and Pregnancy – A practical guide for health professionals (Ministry of Health, 2010), available from **health.govt.nz/publication/alcohol-and-pregnancy-practical-guide-health-professionals**.

Pregnancy & Alcohol Cessation Toolkit – An education resource for health professionals (Alcohol Healthwatch and the University of Otago, 2012), available from **akoatearora.ac.nz/projects/pact**.

Implementing the ABC Alcohol Approach in Primary Care (Royal New Zealand College of General Practitioners and the Health Promotion Agency, 2012), available from **rnzcgp.org.nz/college-resources**.

Information about FASD and the Fetal Alcohol Network NZ available from **fan.org.nz**.

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