



## Alcohol and Pregnancy/ Breastfeeding

### Put Your Baby First

Most women in the United States understand the risks of drinking alcohol while pregnant. But what if you're not pregnant? Alcohol can still cause major damage to your sexual reproduction organs. Men who abuse alcohol are likely to suffer from erectile dysfunction and infertility. Women can also experience infertility, as well as inconsistent menstruation cycles.

Women who drink while pregnant put their unborn babies at unnecessary risk. Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) is the most common preventable cause of mental impairment. Physical abnormalities include stunted growth and facial deformities. Learning difficulties, emotional problems, and even death are other possible side effects of FAS. Since there is no determined "safe amount" a woman can drink while pregnant, she should not drink at all during her pregnancy if she wishes to avoid harming the baby by alcohol.

Women should also avoid drinking if they are currently breastfeeding. Alcohol seeps into the mammary glands, and can be passed through the breast milk to the baby. Since babies' digestive tracts are much more under-developed than an adult's, they are much more susceptible and vulnerable to alcohol poisoning.

## Test Yourself

- Which of the following is a standard drink?
  - 5 ounce glass of beer
  - Margarita with 1.5 ounces of tequila
  - 12 ounce glass of wine
  - Rum and Coke with 3 ounces of rum
- How long does it take for alcohol to completely pass through your system?
  - 90 seconds
  - 60 minutes
  - 3 hours
  - 2 days
- What organ is mostly responsible for breaking down alcohol?
  - Liver
  - Brain
  - Skin
  - Heart
- FAS can cause a lifetime of problems with learning, memory, attention and problem-solving.
  - True
  - False
- Having a drink while breastfeeding can pass alcohol into your baby's system.
  - True
  - False

Answers: 1. b, 2. b, 3. a, 4. a, 5. a



# WOMEN AND ALCOHOL



*Ladies' Night (more)*

## What's a "Drink" Anyway?

What is considered a "drink" and how does the human body break it down?

Typically, a standard drink is one that contains about 14 grams of alcohol.

- **12 ounces of beer (5% alcohol content)**
- **5 ounces of wine (12% alcohol content)**
- **1.5 ounces of distilled spirits (40% alcohol content)**

As alcohol is consumed, your body immediately begins breaking it down. It only takes approximately 90 seconds for alcohol to begin affecting your brain, and on average, it takes your liver a whole hour to break down one drink before it can be eliminated. Because your liver is doing most of the work in breaking it down, your liver is the organ that is most affected by alcohol, but other organs that are affected include the brain, pancreas, heart, bones and skin.

When alcohol passes through the digestive tract, it is dispersed in the water in the body. People are made of approximately 70% water, but as a rule, men weigh more than women. This means that pound for pound, men have more water in their bodies than women. Therefore, a woman's brain, liver and other organs are more exposed to alcohol and its negative side effects.



## History Lesson

### Alcohol Habits of Women

Historically, women have consumed less alcohol than men. In much of the early 20th century, it was taboo for a woman to be seen drinking in public, even in small moderation. In recent years, that number has changed to reflect women are drinking just as often as men. However, women tend to drink more wine and distilled spirits than beer, which have higher alcohol content. Many women also favor mixed drinks, which can have anywhere from one to five different types of alcohol. A Long Island Iced Tea is generally considered a popular drink for women, and it has 5 different types of liquor in it: tequila, vodka, light rum, triple sec and gin!

### Subsequent Health Risks

As the number of women drinking has risen, as has the amount of alcohol content consumed, so have the subsequent health problems. Some problems that affect both men and women, but perhaps affect women differently, include:

- **Liver Disease.** Alcohol causes the liver to become slightly inflamed, but heavy drinking can cause steatosis (fatty liver), alcoholic hepatitis, fibrosis or cirrhosis. Women are more likely to develop alcoholic hepatitis (severe liver inflammation) and are more likely to die from cirrhosis (where the liver becomes so full of scar tissue that it can't function properly).
- **Brain Disease.** Alcohol interferes with the way the brain communicates with the rest of the body, and it can even affect the way the brain looks and works. Some studies have shown that women are more vulnerable to alcohol-induced brain damage than men.
- **Cancer.** Heavy drinking increases the risk for certain cancers, particularly in the digestive tract. Women are also at a higher risk for breast cancer, especially those who have as little as one drink a day, are postmenopausal, or have a family history of breast cancer.
- **Heart Disease.** Heart disease is the leading cause of death in women. Alcohol is a vasodilator, which means it makes your blood thinner and affects your heart's ability to pump it throughout your body. Women are more susceptible to alcohol-related heart disease than men.



### Sandra's Story

Thursday night rolled around, and it was Sandra's office tradition that all of the women go out for drinks together every Thursday night for Ladies' Night. Sandra and her co-workers had gone out every week since Sandra started with the company 5 years ago, and she really enjoyed the comradery she felt with the other women. They also got together on weekends sometime and would drink together. Sandra also had a drink with dinner at least three nights a week. No one ever got belligerently drunk at Ladies' Night, and everyone made sure to find a safe way home if they were still feeling too tipsy to drive by the end of the night. They always just had a really fun time together as they let loose from their demanding positions. Sandra had a few drinks and decided it was time to take a cab home.

The next morning, Sandra noticed some pain in her abdomen, but she assumed it was just cramps and tried to ignore it. She didn't feel hungover, but she certainly didn't feel well. Around lunch time, the pain hadn't subsided at all, so Sandra decided to take a lunch break at the urgent care. "Something is just not right," she thought to herself.

When the doctor examined her abdomen, excruciating pain radiated her body. "Let me run a few tests," the doctor said confidently. "It's probably nothing." It wasn't nothing. Sandra's liver was inflamed and scarred. "How did this happen? I don't have a drinking problem!" cried Sandra. The doctor explained that women are more susceptible to alcohol than men, and even though Sandra never drank excessively in a single sitting, her consistent drinking over time had damaged her liver to dangerous levels.

