Pregnancy, Risks of Alcohol Use

Alcohol is the biggest cause of mental retardation in babies. Women who are pregnant or who may become pregnant should not drink alcohol. This will lessen the chance of giving birth to a baby with any of the harmful effects of FASD (Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders). FASD is the full spectrum of birth defects caused by drinking while pregnant. The spectrum may include mild changes, such as a slight learning disability. Or it could be full FAS (Fetal Alcohol Syndrome). FAS is a permanent condition that can include: severe learning disabilities, decreased growth (*growth deficiencies*), abnormal facial features, brain (*central nervous system*) disorders, and behavior problems. It is unsafe to drink any amount of alcohol when pregnant. When the mother drinks alcohol, so does the baby. The amount of alcohol in the mother's blood shows up as the same amount found in the baby's blood. Alcohol is digested by the mature liver in the mother, but the liver is not mature in the baby. As a result, alcohol affects the baby much more than it affects the mother. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists recommend the safest way to prevent problems to the baby is to not drink any amount of alcohol when pregnant. One of the most preventable causes of a baby developing FASD, especially FAS, is drinking alcohol. FAS is a lifelong physically and mentally disabling condition. **The safest thing to do is not drink alcohol when pregnant.**

RISKS

- Alcohol consumed during pregnancy increases the risk of alcohol related birth defects. These include:
  - Central nervous system disorders.
  - Decreased growth.
  - Delayed intellectual development.
  - Behavioral disorders.
  - Abnormal facial features.
  - Mental retardation.
  - Sleep and sucking disorders.
- Children with FAS are at risk of:
  - Having psychiatric problems.
  - Criminal behavior.
  - Unemployment.
  - Not finishing their education.
- No amount of alcohol can be considered safe during pregnancy.
- Alcohol can damage a fetus at any stage of pregnancy. Damage can occur in the early weeks of pregnancy. This is even before a woman knows that she is pregnant.
- The learning (*cognitive*) and behavior problems due to prenatal alcohol exposure are lifelong.
- Alcohol-related birth defects are completely preventable.
- There is an increased risk of miscarriage and fetal death.
- Fetal growth retardation.
- Increase in accidents at home, away, and driving.
- Drinking alcohol can easily lead to abuse of drugs and smoking.

SYMPTOMS

Drinking alcohol slows down the function of your body and brain. It negatively affects your:

- Walking (*unstable*).
- Hearing.
- Vision.
- Daily activities.
- Driving.
- Mind and memory.
- Talking (*slurred speech*).
- It contributes to bad diet and nutrition, which are important for the growth and development of the baby.
- In time, it will also cause problems with your health, your relationship with your family, friends, and work.

DIAGNOSIS

- Do not wait for symptoms to develop to make the diagnosis.
- At the first prenatal office visit, the caregiver and patient should discuss alcohol drinking when pregnant.

- If the mother is drinking alcohol, both the caregiver and patient should make a serious attempt to stop the drinking completely.

TREATMENT

- The best treatment is to not drink or stop drinking.
- If someone needs help to stop drinking, she should contact the local Alcoholics Anonymous chapter. Or contact a treatment center. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services (SAMHSA) can help people find local centers in their area.
- Intervention by the spouse, family, and friends.
- Counseling by pastor, psychologist, or psychiatrist.
- Hospitalization may be necessary.
- If the spouse drinks alcohol, he should stop.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- A woman should not drink alcohol while she is pregnant.
- A pregnant woman who has already consumed alcohol during her pregnancy should stop immediately. This will reduce further risk to the baby.
- A woman who is considering becoming pregnant should not drink alcohol.
- Women of child-bearing age should talk to their caregivers about this issue. Then take steps to reduce the chance of drinking alcohol while pregnant.
- The father plays an important role in helping the mother abstain from drinking alcohol. He can encourage her to abstain and should abstain himself.
- Avoiding social events where alcohol is served will help, too.
- If you think your baby has FASD or FAS, call your caregiver.

PREVENTION

Do not drink alcohol if you are planning to get pregnant or if you are pregnant.

For more information, see: The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, NIH (www.niaaa.nih.gov) or The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (www.fascenter.samhsa.gov).

Most of this information courtesy of the Advisory from the U.S. Surgeon General.

Document Released: 10/14/2008 Document Re-Released: 12/06/2010
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