



# ALCOHOL, DRUGS AND THE DEVELOPING CHILD

## Alcohol and drug use during pregnancy

*While studies of alcohol, tobacco and drug use among pregnant women indicate that usage rates have been dropping over the past 15 years, there is clear evidence that a significant proportion of women continue to use these substances during pregnancy. Pregnancy is a critical period for the physical and cognitive development of the developing child. Alcohol and drug use during this time can have a profound negative impact on a child's long-term health and developmental outcomes. Comprehensive prevention strategies are needed to address substance use as well as other challenges women may be facing during their pregnancy such as domestic violence, poor physical and mental health, homelessness and poverty.*

Current Australian Government Clinical Practice Guidelines<sup>1</sup> state that the use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs during pregnancy can have negative effects on the developing child and should therefore be avoided. This document summarises current prevalence data for alcohol and other drug use during pregnancy as well as some of their known effects. It also reviews some of the other challenges faced by women during pregnancy.

### How many women use alcohol and other drugs during pregnancy?

According to the 2019 National Drug Strategy Household Survey,<sup>2</sup> rates of women drinking alcohol during pregnancy have been reducing since 2007. The 2019 survey reported that 65 per cent of pregnant women aged 14–49 did not consume alcohol during their pregnancy, compared with 56 per cent in 2016 and 40 per cent in 2007.

Of the women who drank alcohol during pregnancy, 35 per cent said they drank less than usual and fewer than one per cent said they consumed the same amount as when they were not pregnant.<sup>2</sup> One in nine women (11%) who gave birth in Australia in 2014 smoked at some time during their pregnancy, a decrease from 15 per cent in 2009.<sup>3</sup>

### Are some women more vulnerable to using alcohol and other drugs during pregnancy?

The use of alcohol and other drugs during pregnancy is more common among women who are socially disadvantaged, younger, unemployed, and those who have poor physical and mental health and inadequate antenatal care. Domestic violence, homelessness and poverty are also prevalent for this group.<sup>4</sup>

## What is the impact of using alcohol and other drugs during pregnancy?

Exposure to alcohol via maternal consumption during pregnancy is associated with:

- an increased risk of hyperactivity and attention issues, learning and memory deficiencies and problems with social and emotional development<sup>5</sup>
- adaptive behaviour difficulties, such as disrupted educational experiences, delinquent and criminal conduct, inappropriate sexual behaviours, and drug misuse.<sup>6</sup>

Fetal alcohol syndrome is typically regarded as the most severe effect of drinking during pregnancy, causing both physical defects and intellectual or cognitive disabilities in affected children. Symptoms may include:

- deformities, heart defects, slow physical growth, hearing and vision problems
- a loss of coordination and balance, an increased risk of intellectual disabilities, poor memory and attention and difficulty with problem-solving and judgement
- problems with behaviour and impulsivity, poor social skills, and greater difficulty at school.<sup>7</sup>

Findings from the National Perinatal Data Collection<sup>8</sup> showed that in 2019, compared to babies of mothers who did not smoke, babies of mothers who smoked at any time during pregnancy were more likely to be:

- Low birthweight (12.2% compared with 6.0% of liveborn babies)
- Small for gestational age (15.7% compared with 8.7% of liveborn singleton babies)
- Born pre-term (12.8% compared with 8.0%).

Factors such as low birthweight and pre-term birth are associated with an increased risk of delayed development, disease, feeding problems, ear infections and hearing impairment, and potentially long-term damage to the brain, lungs and heart.<sup>9</sup>

Research has found that the use of illicit substances appears to have similar effects to alcohol consumption on child development, though the presence of confounding variables related to drug use creates difficulty in establishing a clear causal link.<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

Research evidence suggests that rates of alcohol and tobacco use are dropping among pregnant Australian women. While these trends are encouraging, there continues to be significant number of women who use alcohol or other drugs while they are pregnant.

There is also a substantial body of evidence for associations between alcohol and other drug use during pregnancy and lifelong problems for unborn children.

There would be considerable value in exploring and implementing evidence-based programs to provide support to pregnant women vulnerable to using drugs and alcohol to improve outcomes for both them and their babies.

Any interventions or programs need to be mindful of other challenges faced by women during their pregnancy, including domestic violence, mental health problems and poverty.

### Seeking your feedback

This research summary addresses one of the topics within the Queensland Family and Child Commission's research agenda. The research agenda identifies opportunities to expand the evidence base and to improve services and outcomes around matters that are relevant to Queensland children, young people and families. We welcome your feedback on this research summary which can be provided via the QR code.



## References

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