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Alcohol and Pregnancy: Another perspective on the Disputed Danish Studies

Is it safe to drink alcohol during pregnancy? A new [Danish study](#) on alcohol and pregnancy reports that drinking up to 8 alcoholic drinks per week during pregnancy has no effect on children's intelligence or activity levels. But this goes against everything we have heard about the dangers of drinking during pregnancy. What about the Surgeon General's advisory? "*No amount of alcohol consumption can be considered safe during pregnancy*". How are we to trust medical research if we receive conflicting messages like these?

Let's start with the most important question...*Is it safe to drink during pregnancy?* The answer is NO. And if you look closely, even the Danish researchers come to this conclusion. Nevertheless, MSNBC reported "A few drinks during pregnancy may be OK, study suggests". Most women in the U.S. who drink alcohol quit when they're pregnant. But some women will be influenced by press like this.

So is the Danish study wrong? Well, let's look at it in more detail. It was an impressively large study. The researchers studied 870 preschool children whose mothers reported drinking during pregnancy and compared them to 758 preschool children whose mothers reported not drinking during pregnancy. They measured the children's IQ and attention levels at age 5 years. Children exposed prenatally to 1 to 8 drinks per week had the same IQ and attention levels as children with no exposure to alcohol. **The reason the children in this study did not appear to be harmed by the alcohol is because the children were too young to measure the full impact alcohol may have had on their brains.** At 5 years of age, the brain is still developing. A 5-year-old's brain is not developed enough to perform complex tasks like remembering and following multiple instructions, writing a report, communicating abstract ideas effectively, exercising good judgment. Over 30 years of research on fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) confirms that alcohol has its greatest impact on complex brain functions. This is why children exposed to and damaged by prenatal alcohol exposure look deceptively good in the preschool years. The full impact of their alcohol exposure will not be evident until their adolescent years.

So if the news reports have you believing that 1 to 8 drinks per week during pregnancy are safe, please consider the following. The statistics below are based on 2,600 children who received a diagnostic evaluation for FAS in the [Washington State FAS Diagnostic & Prevention Network](#) clinics over the past 18 years.

- 1 out of every 7 children diagnosed with FAS (the most severe outcome caused by prenatal alcohol exposure) had a reported exposure of 1-8 drinks per week. (The Danish study did not conduct FAS diagnostic evaluations on the children).
- Half of the children with FAS had developmental scores in the normal range as preschoolers. But all had severe brain dysfunction confirmed by age 10. (The Danish study only assessed preschoolers).

- Only 10% of the children with FAS had attention problems by age 5. 60% had attention problems by the age of 10. (The Danish study only assessed attention at age 5).
- Only 30% of the children with FAS have an IQ below normal. But 100% had severe dysfunction in other areas like language, memory and activity level (The Danish study did not assess these areas).

Which children are most vulnerable? We have no way of knowing because risk is not just based on how much alcohol the mother drank. We know from twin studies that genetics also plays a role. When genetically different twins are exposed to the same levels of alcohol, one twin can be born with FAS while the other twin is normally developed. We also know that metabolism plays a part. Every person absorbs and metabolizes alcohol differently, and a pregnant woman simply can't know how "just one drink" might be affecting her developing fetus.

So, while the science may be complicated and studies sometimes yield conflicting messages, the message for women is simple: to have the *healthiest baby possible*, don't drink alcohol when you're trying to get pregnant and during pregnancy. When a pregnant woman drinks, her child is at risk. If she drinks heavily, her child is at higher risk.

FAS was first identified at the University of Washington in 1973. Washington State, through a collaboration between the State and University, has led the field in FAS diagnosis, intervention, and prevention since that time.

If you are pregnant or trying to get pregnant and you drink alcohol, you should stop. If you cannot stop drinking, please contact us! We are here to help you and your family.



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