

Koori SUPPS

Reducing the risk to
booris by raising
awareness of the
effects of drinking
alcohol when pregnant

Background

- Health professionals have known for a long time that alcohol can cause damage to the baby if the mother drinks while pregnant researchers believed that small amounts drunk in pregnancy were safe.
- Recent research now indicates that even small amounts of alcohol may cause damage to the developing foetus.
- They now have evidence of a spectrum of disorders caused by alcohol called FASD.

What is FASD ?

- Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder FASD
- Alcohol consumed by a pregnant woman can harm her unborn baby.
- The damage caused can be mild to very severe and is permanent.

How does alcohol reach the baby?

Alcohol crosses the placenta from the mother's blood into the baby's bloodstream.

This means the baby shares the exact blood alcohol level as its mother.

However because the baby is developing and especially its brain it is more susceptible to damage than an adult would be.

How does alcohol cause damage to the baby?

The effects of alcohol on a foetus can include:

- Harm to the development of the unborn baby's nervous system, including the brain.
- Undernourishment of the growing baby by blocking the absorption of vitamins, glucose and other nutrients.
- Triggering of earlier-than-normal cell changes in the baby's face.
- Reduction in the amount of oxygen available to the baby.

Why is FASD a problem?

There is no cure if a child is born with FASD.

A baby affected by FASD may experience a range of difficulties including:

- Developmental delays
- Behaviour problems
- Learning difficulties
- Memory problems
- Increased risk of behaviour problems – for example, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder ADHD
- Increased risk of mental health difficulties such as depression and psychosis
- Increased risk of alcohol and drug misuse

What does this mean?

If a child is born with FASD this disability may

- Cause the child to struggle at school.
- Make it difficult for the child to make friends.
- Cause behaviour that is difficult to control.
- Place strain on the family financially and socially.
- Place strain on relationships.
- Limit the child's employment opportunities when they become an adult.

Who is at risk ?

- It is difficult to determine who is at risk but we do know that the amount consumed is only part of the story. Factors which contribute include-
- Poverty
- Poor nutrition
- Genetics
- Older mothers
- Other drugs taken during pregnancy (unless prescribed by a doctor who knows you are pregnant)
- Not attending ante natal health care
- Research has been unable to determine a safe level of alcohol and therefore the NHMRC guidelines have been changed.

How can it be prevented?

It is now recommended that pregnant women do not drink alcohol at all during pregnancy.

The more alcohol consumed, the greater the risk of the baby developing FASD.

Who's problem is it?

- The baby
- The pregnant woman
- The father of the baby
- The family members of a pregnant woman
- Friends
- The community
- Service providers who have contact with pregnant women

We are all responsible for preventing FASD.

How do I ask ?

- It can be perceived to be an invasion of privacy to ask a pregnant woman if she is drinking during her pregnancy.
- However asking about drinking if done in a non judgmental manner as part of routine practice is professional and appropriate.
- In your package we have included some strategies on how to ask women about their alcohol use which can be included in standard Information gathering.

How can I help?

- Give any pregnant woman or women who may be considering becoming pregnant a copy of the pamphlet contained in this package.
- If possible read it with them and make sure they understand the information it contains.
- Ask them if they have been drinking and if they have any concerns.

What more can I do?

- If the woman has concerns she may find it difficult to stop drinking, you can encourage her to seek help on the numbers or services listed on the pamphlet.
- If she is concerned she may have already caused damage encourage her to talk to her doctor or to speak to the doctor at the Aboriginal Medical Service.

Where can I find out more information?

- We have included in this package information from the National Health and Medical Research Council which explores this issue in much more detail and provides references on studies which have been conducted on the impact of alcohol on pregnancy.

Who can help?

- Talk about FASD to potential fathers, Elders, sisters, brothers, Aunties and Uncles.
- Everyone has a part to play in helping women to make healthy choices during pregnancy.
- The more people who understand the risks the more supported pregnant women will feel.

