

Published reports inaccurate concerning alcohol consumption during pregnancy

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A national alcohol research group is concerned that the media's misinterpretation of a recent British research study could encourage pregnant women to be more at ease with temperate alcohol consumption.

Some media reports erroneously stated that the study by The University College London researchers revealed that light drinking by pregnant women could be beneficial to their babies. Other articles said light drinking during pregnancy would not affect the behavior or mental acuity of babies born to drinking mothers.

The Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders Study Group, a subgroup of the Research Society on Alcoholism, says the conclusion of the study was not reported accurately. "Unfortunately, several media outlets misinterpreted this report to mean that drinking improved the children's outcome," the FASD Study Group said.

The published report looked at the drinking patterns of pregnant mothers of three-year-olds and assessed the behavior and cognitive skills of the children. The University College London researchers actually reported that the children born to women who drank lightly during pregnancy were not at increased risk compared with children of mothers who did not drink during pregnancy.

However, this result may be based on the higher socioeconomic status of the light drinking mothers and their children involved in this study. Higher socioeconomic status is well known to improve an infant's

neurodevelopmental outcome. The study's authors, Dr. Yvonne Kelly at University College London and colleagues, suggested this explanation for their findings and the FASD Study Group agrees with that conclusion.

Many published reporters show that even moderate to light drinking can cause birth defects.

"Generally, the adverse effects of light drinking during pregnancy are subtle and may go undetected in children," said Feng Zhou, Ph.D., president of the FASD Study Group and a professor of anatomy, cell biology and neurobiology at the Indiana University School of Medicine. "Other alcohol research studies of moderate drinking during pregnancy have shown an adverse impact on multiple aspects of development through adolescence and young adulthood even when other important environmental factors are taken into account."

Dr. Zhou said the news reporters have been carried in various European and American publications and on news web sites.

"The media reports are alarming for a number of reasons but it is particularly disturbing at this time of year when holiday parties may make alcohol consumption more accessible and appealing to pregnant women who have read the erroneous reports," he said.

The consensus of public health providers and alcohol researchers is that even light drinking can interfere with biological processes critical in the development of the fetal brain, said Dr. Zhou and other Study Group officers, Cynthia J.M. Kane, Ph.D., vice president and professor of neurobiology and developmental sciences, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, and Susan Smith, Ph.D., secretary and treasurer, and professor of nutritional science at the University of Wisconsin- Madison.

For additional information compiled by the Study Group on the research into the effects on the children of mothers who consume alcohol during pregnancy, see www.rsoa.org/fas.html .

Source: Indiana University

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