

Research links alcohol use before pregnancy to intestinal birth defect

May 1 2014, by Nora Plunkett



(Medical Xpress)—Women should refrain from drinking alcohol before they try to become pregnant, according to maternal-fetal medicine specialists at Loyola University Health System.

"A woman can conceive at any point in her cycle, so [women](#) should avoid [alcohol](#) well in advance of becoming pregnant," said Jean Goodman, MD, lead investigator, division director of Maternal-Fetal Medicine at Loyola University Health System. "We recommend that women begin taking [folic acid supplements](#) starting three months prior to conception. This is an ideal time to refrain from alcohol use as well because you are in the mindset of preparing your body for pregnancy."

Alcohol is associated with an increased risk for mental delays, cardiac anomalies and facial clefting in babies. In a recent study, Loyola researchers also found that alcohol is linked to gastroschisis, a [birth defect](#) of the baby's abdominal wall. These data were presented recently at the 2014 Society for Reproductive Investigation 61st Annual Scientific Meeting in Florence, Italy.

Researchers surveyed 36 women who gave birth to babies with gastroschisis and 76 women who did not have infants with this defect. They found an association between gastroschisis and alcohol use one month prior to conception and during the first trimester before women knew they were pregnant. They also revealed that gastroschisis occurs in women of all ages, races and financial means. Researchers found no link between gastroschisis and poor maternal nutrition or vasoactive stimulants such as tobacco or illicit drugs.

Gastroschisis is typically identified during an ultrasound. These pregnancies are monitored closely to ensure the unborn baby remains healthy. Plans are made for a careful delivery and surgery for the infant at the time of birth. While the prognosis is good for these babies following surgery, the rising prevalence of [gastroschisis](#) is a global health concern.

"Preconception programs focused on alcohol abstinence may help to reverse the increasing incidence of this birth defect worldwide," said Dr. Goodman, who also is a professor of Obstetrics & Gynecology at Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine.

Provided by Loyola University Health System

Citation: Research links alcohol use before pregnancy to intestinal birth defect (2014, May 1) retrieved 6 May 2024 from

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