

# Heavy drinking when young increases alcohol risk in early pregnancy

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Young women who binge or frequently drink alcohol were more likely to drink during the early stages of pregnancy, according to new research.

The study, led by the Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI) and Deakin University, found [alcohol use](#) was common among young adult [women](#) prior to becoming pregnant (72 percent) and in the first six weeks of [pregnancy](#) (76 percent).

The research, published in *Addiction*, used MCRI data from the Victorian Intergenerational Health Cohort Study (VIHCS) and involved almost 300 Australian women, highlighted a striking continuity in women's patterns of alcohol use across two decades and into the first weeks of pregnancy.

It found that most women who drank in early pregnancy had an earlier history of frequent (77 percent) and/or binge drinking (85 percent) across the adolescent or young adult years.

Deakin University Associate Professor Delyse Hutchinson said the [study](#) was one of the first worldwide to have collected prospective longitudinal data spanning the peak period of alcohol use through to the early weeks of pregnancy.

"We assessed risky drinking patterns, including binge and frequent drinking, and found they continued unchanged into the early weeks of pregnancy, particularly the first six weeks when many women are not aware they are pregnant," she said.

"The data showed the proportion of women drinking on most days (16 percent) and binge drinking (17 percent) were strikingly similar both before pregnancy and during the early weeks of pregnancy."

Associate Professor Hutchinson said once women became aware of their pregnancy, at around six weeks gestation, the rates of drinking dropped dramatically from 76 percent to 12 percent, showing women were making sound decisions when they realized they were pregnant.

University of Sydney Professor Elizabeth Elliott said that understanding the extent of alcohol use in early pregnancy was important because [prenatal alcohol exposure](#) could cause permanent harm to a developing fetus, including to critical brain and organ development.

"Alcohol also has many negative health consequences for [pregnant women](#) and for pregnancy outcomes, including an elevated risk of miscarriage, and harms to the unborn child, including fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, which are preventable," she said.

"The fact that more than three-quarters of women continued frequent or binge drinking when becoming pregnant demonstrates we must do better with public health messaging."

MCRI Professor George Patton said that reducing risky drinking behavior in the teenage years, lessened the potential harms to young people themselves and the next generation.

**More information:** Delyse Hutchinson et al, Longitudinal prediction of periconception alcohol use: a 20-year prospective cohort study across adolescence, young adulthood and pregnancy, *Addiction* (2021). [DOI: 10.1111/add.15632](#)

Provided by Murdoch Children's Research Institute

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