

Planning for a baby? Why both men and women should consider quitting alcohol before and during pregnancy

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You might want to make booze a thing of the past. Credit: pexels/monstera

When a couple is planning on having a baby, it's often the woman who is seen as responsible for the [health of the unborn child](#).

In the UK, the chief medical officer's [drinking guidelines](#) recommend that women should abstain from [alcohol](#) consumption during [pregnancy](#). This is because it's known to increase the risk of [miscarriage](#) and [fetal alcohol spectrum disorders](#) (FASD).

FASD is an umbrella term used to describe a range of emotional, behavioral, developmental and learning challenges that are linked to a baby's exposure to alcohol while in the womb.

The guidelines also recommend that if you're planning to become pregnant, the safest approach is not to drink at all to minimize the risks to your pregnancy.

But evidence from large surveys shows that not all women stop drinking before pregnancy—whether the pregnancy was intended or not. In a 2017 [study](#) of 5,036 women in the US, the prevalence of alcohol consumption before pregnancy was similar between those with intended (55%) and [unintended pregnancies](#) (56%).

In another 2015 [study](#) of 3,390 Swedish women, weekly alcohol consumption was not significantly different between women with a "very planned pregnancy" (11%) compared with women with a "very unplanned pregnancy" (14%).

And a 2013 [survey](#) of 258 Danish women found that although 77% of their pregnancies were "very" or "fairly well planned", one out of five reported binge drinking early in the pregnancy. Among women with unplanned pregnancies, this rose to one out of three.

But while the focus tends to be on a woman's relationship with alcohol before and during pregnancy, an increasing amount of evidence indicates that men's alcohol use also [plays a role](#) when it comes to the health of the baby.

Indeed, alcohol can [affect sperm DNA](#), in some cases reducing fertility and the potential to conceive.

Why stop drinking?

Better health outcomes for babies [begin before conception](#), with [clear links established](#) between the health of men and women before pregnancy and the health of their offspring.

Research shows that if couples are trying to conceive, it makes sense for them both to quit the booze [at least six months before pregnancy](#). This helps to reduce the risk of potential negative outcomes for the baby such as [congenital heart disease](#).

It also has [benefits](#) for the [expectant parents](#), such as better sleep quality, increased energy, and enhanced concentration levels.

Research has also [found](#) that if a couple lives together and the male partner drinks, there is a higher chance that the woman will drink alcohol before and during the pregnancy.

One of the reasons why this might be the case is explored in [another study](#) where women said that drinking with a partner, whether before or during pregnancy, provided a sense of social connection.

The period before pregnancy, known as preconception, is a [window of opportunity](#) for would-be parents to improve their health and increase their likelihood of conceiving. And [alcohol consumption](#) should be thought about as part of this.

As part of our recent research, we [reviewed the literature](#) exploring people's and health professionals' views about information and support for reducing drinking in the period before getting pregnant.

We found that women were aware that lifestyle factors such as smoking or drinking alcohol can affect their pregnancy and increase the risk of poor outcomes for the baby. But there was a notable lack of awareness of the importance of men reducing their [alcohol consumption](#) when planning for pregnancy, too.

Indeed, men [don't usually go to clinics](#) to get information about preconception health, as this is usually left to the woman.

Quit together

While there is some indication that men, as well as women, are open to changing their [drinking](#) behavior when planning for pregnancy, our literature review found that [very few studies](#) have explored men's or partners' views on preconception health.

And while there are promising results from interventions and approaches aimed at enhancing preconception health in men and women, such as [alcohol screening](#) followed by counseling and [health education on changing behavior](#), there's still not enough emphasis placed on men's health at the preconception stage. This needs to change because, as the research shows, a baby's health is influenced by both mum and dad.

So if you are considering trying for a baby, now could be the time for both partners to set new goals and [cut down on drinking](#) together. And if you're concerned about the amount you drink, or are dependent on alcohol, you should get [professional advice and support](#) on cutting down safely.

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