

Drinking in pregnancy could affect children's mental health

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New research led by the University of Bristol has found children whose mothers drink during pregnancy could be at greater risk of mental health problems, particularly anxiety, depression and conduct disorder.

The study published in *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, was carried out by the University's Tobacco and Alcohol Research Group (TARG) part of the School of Psychological Science and MRC Integrative Epidemiology Unit (MRC IEU).

High-levels of alcohol use in [pregnancy](#) is known to affect a child's [physical health](#). However, less is known about the association of alcohol use in pregnancy and [mental health](#) in children, particularly for low-levels of prenatal alcohol use.

The researchers carried out a [systematic review](#) to evaluate current research that has investigated prenatal alcohol use and children's mental health.

Kayleigh Easey, the study's lead author and a Ph.D. student at Bristol's School of Psychological Science, said: "Our findings suggest that alcohol use during pregnancy may be associated with an increased risk of mental health problems in children, and provide support for government guidelines recommending complete abstinence from alcohol during pregnancy. Women can use this information to further inform their choices, and to avoid risk from alcohol use, both during pregnancy and as a precautionary measure when trying to conceive."

Government guidelines, updated by the Department of Health in January 2016, advised [pregnant women](#) that the safest approach is to abstain from drinking alcohol during their entire pregnancy. However, there is still uncertainty about how light to moderate alcohol use can affect children.

The researchers are presently looking at how different levels of alcohol may influence mental health in children, but current research is not easy to evaluate due to the differences between how each individual study was conducted, such as what it was designed to measure.

The associations shown within this review do not provide evidence of a causal effect on their own, which can be difficult to demonstrate. However, it is important for women to understand what the current evidence shows, to allow them to make informed decisions about drinking during pregnancy. Women can use this information to inform their choices, and to avoid potential risks from alcohol use.

The research group's next step will be to investigate whether light to moderate [alcohol](#) use in pregnancy may be harmful to different mental health outcomes in children from large cohort studies, such as the Children of the 90s study, which have important data on both mothers and their children.

More information: Kayleigh E. Easey et al. Prenatal alcohol exposure and offspring mental health: A systematic review, *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2019.01.007](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2019.01.007)

Provided by University of Bristol

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