Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) – Prevention: No Alcohol, No Risk!

Since 2012 the Chief Medical Officer, Scotland, advised that “pregnant women and those trying to conceive should avoid alcohol”. Whether it is beer, wine or spirits, alcohol can cause harm to your baby at any time during pregnancy. It is important that the ‘No alcohol, no risk’ message is shared widely across all populations.

During the years I have been delivering training on FASD Awareness throughout Ayrshire and Arran I have found it extremely interesting to hear the thoughts of individuals from varying backgrounds and professions about the alcohol guidelines during pregnancy. When asked “what are the alcohol guidelines during pregnancy?” the opinion has not always been the same and at times not known. However I am pleased so say that more recently I generally get the feeling that people have become more familiar with the guidelines as there is not the same level of uncertainty.

Digging a bit deeper and asking “do you know why the guidelines are no alcohol, no risk” is a different matter and there is a gap in understanding. I would like to take this opportunity to highlight some of the facts.

This is what we know. There is no known safe amount of alcohol that you can drink when you are pregnant. Whether you are pregnant or thinking about becoming pregnant it’s important to remember that drinking alcohol while pregnant can put your baby at risk. It is known that even small amounts of alcohol cross over the placenta into the fetal circulation. This is why the ‘No alcohol, no risk’ message is the safest choice. Currently, in the UK, 40% of our pregnancies are exposed to alcohol with 15% exposed to binge levels – so I feel raising awareness of not only the guidelines but also the reasons why the guidelines are ‘no alcohol, no risk’ women are in a far better position to make an informed choice.

The media has not helped by reporting mixed messages!

- BBC News: Light drinking ‘not harmful to baby’ says scientists.
- The Telegraph: A glass of wine a day while pregnant ‘will not harm your baby’.
- Sky News: Call to make drinking while pregnant a crime.
So, when we talk about risk – what exactly does that mean? Some of the risks may include the baby being born early or with a low birth weight. Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is also a risk as a baby’s brain and body are growing and developing for the entire nine months of pregnancy. Therefore, drinking alcohol during pregnancy can affect how the baby’s brain and body develops. Something else to think about is that although FASD may not be detected at birth, it can become apparent later in life and carry a wide range of implications including difficulties with development, learning and/or behaviour.

Prevention is key to reducing the prevalence of FASD! FASD Awareness Day is an excellent opportunity to raise further awareness and to share knowledge. As well as contributing to prevention campaigns, NHS Ayrshire and Aran also have resources available to download on our website that provide further information on alcohol and pregnancy and FASD.

Please visit: https://www.nhsaaa.net/services-a-to-z/fetal-alcohol-spectrum-disorder-fasd/

Thank you for taking the time to read this blog – to find out further information or to enquire about training on FASD please contact aa-uhb.fasdadvisoryteam@nhs.net

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Other sources of information:

- Fetal Alcohol Advisory & Support Team Twitter
- FASD Network booklet for young adults with FASD
- Community Living booklet on supporting adults with FASD
- ACAMH podcast on FASD with Dr Jennifer Shields & Dr Sarah Brown
- FASD Hub Scotland