

Alcohol Use and Premature Birth

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It is well known that drinking during pregnancy can cause birth defects, cognitive disabilities, developmental delays, learning difficulties, and behavioral disorders. Most people do not realize, however, that alcohol use during pregnancy is one of the known causes of prematurity. (1)

Approximately ten percent of all births in the United States are classified as preterm, which is defined as delivery occurring before 37 complete weeks of gestation. Preterm delivery causes the majority of neonatal deaths (except for those related to genetic birth defects) and accounts for more than one half of neonatal hospital nursery costs. (2)

When looking at alcohol's effects on preterm labor, we should include questions about alcohol's possible indirect effects and alcohol's connection to other causes of prematurity.

Multiple risk factors associated with preterm delivery include the following:

1. infection
2. physical abuse
3. cocaine use
4. lack of prenatal care
5. poor nutrition

1. **Infection:** Approximately 40 percent of spontaneous premature births are thought to be caused by infection. (3) Types of infections include sexually transmitted diseases (STD) such as gonorrhea and chlamydia, which is the most frequently reported bacterial STD in the United States. (4) Although chlamydia is easily treated with antibiotics, this STD often has mild or absent symptoms; the pregnant woman with chlamydia may never receive a diagnosis or seek treatment. Alcohol use increases the risk of unprotected sex and multiple sex partners, which increases the risk of chlamydia and other genitourinary infections. (5)

2. **Physical abuse:** Women whose partners had a drinking problem were 3.4 times (95% CI 1.2-9.9) more likely to have been abused than women whose partners did not have a drinking problem. (6) Women who are heavy drinkers are more likely to have partners who are heavy drinkers, and women are likely to increase their drinking behavior due to influence of their partner's drinking behavior. (7-8)

3. **Cocaine use:** Women who abuse cocaine during pregnancy are more likely to continue drinking alcohol during the third trimester. The women most likely to abuse alcohol and cocaine during pregnancy also have other characteristics that are significant risk factors for poor pregnancy outcome. (9) Alcohol use is a risk factor in relapse of cocaine abuse. (10)

4. **Lack of prenatal care:** There is an association between lack of prenatal care and the increased risk of preterm labor and other birth complications. (11) Women who abuse alcohol and other drugs are less likely to receive early prenatal care. (12)

5. **Nutrition:** Although it is difficult to isolate factors such as nutrition in human studies, there are animal studies that support the link between poor nutrition and preterm birth. (13) There is a link between heavy alcohol use and malnutrition. (14) Also, alcohol interferes with the nutritional process by affecting digestion, storage, utilization, and excretion of nutrients. (15)

Increased awareness about the risk of alcohol use during pregnancy can prevent many cases of premature birth, as well as the serious effects associated with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders.

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