

What to eat and drink when pregnant: New studies

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7 Oct 2010

There is fresh debate over drinking during pregnancy. Researchers agree that the area is "highly politically and morally charged".

Alcohol in pregnancy

According to Australian government advice women who are trying to conceive or who are pregnant should avoid alcohol because it has proved impossible to establish a safe level of alcohol consumption in pregnancy. Excess alcohol consumption during pregnancy can cause foetal alcohol syndrome that can lead to mental retardation, behavioural problems and birth defects.

The latest study involved over 11 000 women who were asked about their drinking habits and their child's behaviour at intervals until they were aged five. The women were divided into non-drinkers, women who gave up drinking while pregnant, light drinkers who consumed one or two units a week or in a sitting, moderate drinkers who drank between three and six units a week or heavy/binge drinkers who consumed more than seven units a week or six in one sitting.

The lighter, the better

Results showed that light drinkers were 30% less likely to have children with social or emotional difficulties than those who did not drink in pregnancy. This is where the controversy arose. Lead author Dr Yvonne Kelly from UCL, said the more social factors like mother's education level, family income and parental discipline and current drinking habits were taken into account the weaker the link between drinking and emotional and intellectual well being of the child became. Thus she said, "We are not advocating that people change their behaviour and drink to improve their child's health because that is not the message at all....Children whose mothers reported drinking low levels of alcohol were not at increased risk of difficulties at age five....There is a highly political and morally charged debate around these topics but we do not want to get into that. We are not advocating one thing or another, we are scientists."

The findings were published in the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*.

Not surprisingly women who drank at higher levels were clearly more likely to have children with problems, especially if they were boys. Experts at the National Organisation For Foetal Alcohol Syndrome brought attention to a flaw in the study. They said the study looked at children up to the age of five where as some problems might not manifest until age seven. In retaliation to the findings a spokesman for the Department of Health said, "After assessing the available evidence, we cannot say with confidence that drinking during pregnancy is safe and will not harm your baby. Therefore, as a

precautionary measure, our advice to pregnant women and women trying to conceive is to avoid alcohol...Our advice is clear so as not to confuse women. It is consistent with advice from the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence."

Fruits and vegetables during pregnancy

In another study by a team at University of Auckland published in the British journal of *Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, it was seen that consumption of at least three portions of green vegetables a day reduced the risk of a small baby by half, and eating less than one portion of fruit a week increased the risk by half. The study looked at 3500 women. Three portions of oily fish a week reduced the risk of a small baby by 60%.

According to Professor Philip Steer, *BJOG* editor-in-chief, "The importance of taking up and maintaining a healthy lifestyle before and during pregnancy has repeatedly been shown, however we live in an era of fast and convenience foods which are attractive but bad for our health if eaten too often and to the exclusion of healthier options. This study emphasises the importance of good diet and nutrition. Unfortunately, many people find it difficult to resist the temptations of 'junk' food...If more women can be persuaded to have a better diet during pregnancy, using the motivation of optimising their baby's health, then as they are commonly in charge of the family diet, we could improve the health of the whole population. The take-home message is: Fewer takeaways, more fresh fruit and vegetables."

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