Pregnancy is a time of great change for the person having the baby and the loved ones supporting them. If you are pregnant, breastfeeding, thinking of having a baby, or are supporting someone who is having a baby, it is important to consider the potential effects of different types of drugs to reduce any negative impacts on the pregnancy. This fact sheet provides an overview of the information that might be useful with respect to pregnancy, alcohol and other drugs.

What’s the first step?
If you are considering becoming pregnant or are already pregnant then it is important to consider what you can do to improve the health outcomes for you and your baby. There are a range of things to consider, including:

• Understanding the drugs that you may be taking and their effects on you while you are pregnant
• If you are currently taking any medications or other drugs and would like to stop, seek medical advice
• Organising regular appointments to keep track of pregnancy progress
• Taking simple steps to improve your diet.

Alcohol and other drugs
There are a range of substances that people might use or come into contact with before considering having a baby.

The following substances may be harmful during pregnancy:

• Legal drugs such as alcohol, tobacco and caffeine
• Complementary medicines such as herbal preparations and nutritional supplements
• Over-the-counter medicines such as antacids, cold and flu medicines, diet pills, laxatives and analgesics
• Prescribed medicines such as analgesics, tranquillisers and sleeping pills
• Illegal drugs such as cannabis, amphetamines, cocaine, ecstasy, GHB, hallucinogens and heroin
• Drugs used to treat opiate or alcohol dependence such as methadone, buprenorphine and naltrexone
• Other substances such as glues and aerosols (inhalants or volatile substances).

Why is alcohol and other drug use during pregnancy an important health issue?
Alcohol and other drugs can be harmful to a developing baby throughout the pregnancy, as they will reach the fetus through the placenta or the fallopian tube. The health outcomes will depend on the drugs that are taken, but the impact of each drug will depend on:

• Age
• Gender
• The individual’s state of health
• How they enter the body: by mouth, by injection, snorted or inhaled, used on the skin, used as suppositories
• The amount used
• How often they are used
• The environment in which they are used.

Some drugs can cause a baby to be born too small or too soon, or to have withdrawal symptoms, birth defects, or learning and behavioural problems. The impact of alcohol or other drugs on the baby may include conditions such as Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, or Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), or may increase the possibility of Sudden Infant Death syndrome (SIDS).
Alcohol and pregnancy
The National Health and Medical Research Council’s Australian Guidelines to Reduce Health Risks from Drinking Alcohol recommend that for women who are pregnant or planning a pregnancy not drinking is the safest option².

Due to ethical limitations with research in this space, it is not possible to establish a ‘no-effect’ level. For this reason it is difficult to set a safe or no-risk drinking level while pregnant.

References
   thewomens.org.au/health-information/pregnancy-and-birth/pregnancy-drugs-alcohol/overview-a-healthy-start

Additional Information
Royal Women’s Hospital – Pregnancy and AOD • thewomens.org.au/health-information/pregnancy-and-birth/pregnancy-drugs-alcohol
Pregnant Pause • pregnantpause.org.au
Drug Facts • adf.org.au/drug-facts
Preventing FASD • adf.org.au/insights/preventing-fasd

Support Services
DrugInfo • 1300 85 85 84
ADF’s free, confidential phone service, providing information and referral for alcohol and other drugs.

DirectLine • 1800 888 236
Free, confidential service offering over the phone counselling, support and referral (24 hours, 7 days a week).

Quitline • 13 78 48
Confidential service supporting people who want to quit smoking.

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