

Enhancing Patient Care

Prenatal exposure to alcohol is the leading cause of preventable and non-genetic birth defects in Canada and the Western world (Best Start, 2002; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2004). Each year in Canada, approximately nine out of every 1,000 children are born with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006). It is estimated that more than 3,000 children a year are born with FASD and 300,000 individuals are currently living with the effects of prenatal exposure to alcohol (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006). Prevention, identification, and intervention efforts are crucial as the emotional and financial costs of raising a child with FASD are high for families, professionals, and society.

Health care professionals who care for women of childbearing years, particularly women who are pregnant, can have an impact on the prevention of FASD through open and effective communication about alcohol consumption. It is important to not only discuss and assess alcohol risk with pregnant women, but also with all women of childbearing years.

Health care professionals who care for women of childbearing years can:

- introduce the discussion of alcohol use as a general topic related to overall health;
- engage in discussion about alcohol use in a sensitive manner;
- ask about alcohol use and screen for alcohol risk at key times (e.g., during routine exams);
- provide appropriate advice regarding alcohol use during pregnancy;
- encourage modification of drinking behaviour as necessary; and
- refer women to appropriate sources of support combined with follow-up care.

This resource aims to serve as a guide for health care professionals and discusses the importance of alcohol screening, making referrals, providing follow-up care, and connecting patients to community resources (Loock, Conry, Cook, Chudley, & Rosales, 2005). The emphasis is on open discussion about alcohol use during pregnancy and alcohol risk assessment with women of childbearing years, especially those who are pregnant. Topics that are covered in the resource include alcohol use and pregnancy, women and alcohol use during pregnancy, and clinical practices.

Role of Health Care Professionals

Health care professionals are in a position to ask, advise, and assist women regarding their current drinking behaviour and can play a key role in motivating patients to refrain from drinking alcohol or to decrease their alcohol consumption (Best Start, 2002).

Best practice emphasizes the importance of health care professionals sensitively engaging in discussion about alcohol use during pregnancy and assessing alcohol risk using a standardized screening tool with women of childbearing years (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2004; 2006). A situational analysis identified the importance of routinely using a standardized screening tool to identify women at risk of having a child who has been prenatally exposed to alcohol (Legge, Roberts, & Butler, 2000).

There are brief approaches that health care professionals can utilize to address alcohol use during pregnancy, and with women of childbearing years. These approaches can be used to identify, support, and assist at-risk patients prior to and during pregnancy (Best Start, 2002; College of Family Physicians of Canada, 1994). A standardized screening tool to assess alcohol risk along with brief motivational approaches are crucial elements in enhancing patient care (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2004).

With Women of Childbearing Years

Health care professionals can ask female patients of childbearing years about their current alcohol use and advise that no alcohol is the safest choice if they are planning a pregnancy or are at risk of becoming pregnant.

With Pregnant Women

Health care professionals can engage in discussion with pregnant women about alcohol use during pregnancy in a non-judgmental manner and inform them of the risks of drinking during pregnancy. Standardized alcohol screening will assist in identifying at-risk or high-risk patients. The use of brief motivational approaches can accompany advisement of abstaining from alcohol use to support behaviour change.

Ask, Advise, Assist

Ask

- all women of childbearing years about current alcohol use; and
- all pregnant women about current alcohol use.

Advise

- all women of childbearing years that no alcohol is the safest choice when planning a pregnancy or at risk of becoming pregnant; and
- all pregnant women that abstaining from alcohol is the safest choice during pregnancy.

Assist

- all women by providing appropriate care through information, engaging in discussion in a non-judgmental manner, and initiating follow-up referrals to appropriate programs and services.

Challenges of Alcohol Risk Assessment

There are several reasons why health care professionals may not always initiate discussion about alcohol consumption during pregnancy with each woman of childbearing years or conduct alcohol risk assessment using a standardized screening tool. Barriers may include:

- time constraints;
- discomfort;
- level of knowledge;
- uncertainty of how to ask, advise, and assist;
- biases/opinions on alcohol use;
- issues regarding personal alcohol consumption; and
- concern regarding the patient's reaction.

As a result of these concerns, health care professionals may:

- avoid discussion of alcohol use during pregnancy;
 - *"She doesn't seem to be the type of woman who drinks during pregnancy."*
 - *"If she admits she's drinking, I am not sure how to address the situation."*
- approach the discussion with a judgmental question;
 - *"You don't drink, do you?"*
- react in a way that contributes to the stigma and shame the patient may already be feeling;
 - *"How can you continue to drink like this? Don't you care about your baby?"*
- allow personal biases to affect addressing alcohol use during pregnancy; or
 - *"I consume alcohol myself and feel uncomfortable asking about and screening for alcohol use with my patients."*
 - *"I believe there are safe levels of alcohol and that only heavy or binge drinking leads to harmful effects on the fetus."*
- ask questions that fail to explore and/or further discuss the topic of alcohol use during pregnancy.
 - *"You know about the effects of alcohol during pregnancy, don't you?"*

Discussion about alcohol use during pregnancy and standardized alcohol risk assessment should occur with each woman of childbearing years, regardless of her age, socio-economic status, cultural background, ethnicity, and/or education level. This resource will aim to address the concerns that health care professionals may have when caring for women of childbearing years regarding alcohol use during pregnancy.