

# Women and Alcohol Use During Pregnancy

## Life Conditions

Life conditions can set the stage for women to use alcohol during pregnancy. Understanding the following factors is essential in preventing FASD. Women may drink during pregnancy because:

- they may be unaware that they are pregnant;
- they may know other women who consumed alcohol during pregnancy whose children appear to be healthy;
- alcohol use may be the social norm;
- alcohol use is common when celebrating festive or special events;
- they may be unaware of the harms of alcohol use;
- they may be struggling with addiction; and/or
- alcohol may be used to cope with difficult life situations such as:
  - poverty;
  - violence;
  - sexual abuse;
  - trauma;
  - depression;
  - mental health problems; and/or
  - unplanned and unwanted pregnancies.

A research study (Poole & Isaac, 2001) found that the top barriers to seeking support reported by women who consumed alcohol during pregnancy were:

- shame;
- fear of having their child removed by child welfare services;
- fear of prejudicial treatment;
- feelings of depression and low self-esteem;
- belief that they can change on their own and without assistance or support;
- lack of information about accessible services and programs; and
- waiting lists for treatment services.

## Specialized Approaches

Although all women may be at risk for consuming alcohol during pregnancy, there are several populations that appear to be at high risk. Patients that may require specialized approaches when identifying alcohol use during pregnancy include pregnant teenagers, Aboriginal women, diverse cultural groups, women of low socio-economic status, women of high socio-economic status, and women living in abusive situations.

### Pregnant Teenagers

As cited by Best Start (2002), high rates of heavy and binge drinking place young women at risk for unprotected sexual activity that can lead to unplanned pregnancy (Allard-Hendren, 2000). Any delay in recognition of pregnancy and initiation of prenatal care can increase the length of time that the fetus is exposed to alcohol.

### Aboriginal Women

In some Aboriginal communities, alcohol use prior to and during pregnancy may be a symptom of community concerns such as poverty, lack of hope, and despair (Tait, 2000). Many Aboriginal communities believe that effective treatment is based on holistic care reflected in the medicine wheel teachings and a rediscovery of cultural and spiritual traditions. Whenever possible and if preferred by the woman, it is best to refer Aboriginal women who use alcohol to culturally appropriate services.

### Diverse Cultural Groups

Alcohol use during pregnancy affects the fetus, regardless of ethnicity and culture. There are various cultural beliefs regarding women's roles, alcohol use, appropriate care during pregnancy, and child rearing practices. It is important to be sensitive and non-judgmental to the range of cultural values and beliefs that exist.

### Women with Low Socio-Economic Status

Women who live in poverty may use alcohol to deal with high levels of stress and despair due to inadequate housing, lack of clothing, food and childcare, low levels of support, and a history of trauma and abuse (Neal, 2004). It is helpful to have information on services that meet basic needs (e.g., food, shelter, support, and legal services) and to provide advice about alcohol use in a practical, empathetic, and non-judgmental manner.

### Women with High Socio-Economic Status

Health care professionals may not always ask well-dressed, articulate, and educated women about alcohol use. As cited in Best Start (2002), some studies show higher rates of alcohol consumption during pregnancy among women of higher socio-economic status (e.g., Dzakpasu, Mery, & Trouton, 1998). It is important to avoid making assumptions based on income or marital status.

## **Women Living in Abusive Situations**

Women living in abusive situations may use alcohol as a coping mechanism. Curry (1998) found an association between abuse during pregnancy and an increased incidence of substance use and psychosocial stress. Of the women who completed the Violence Against Women Survey (VAWS), 21% reported being physically abused during pregnancy and in 40% of those cases, the abuse began during pregnancy (Statistics Canada, 1993; 2006). Women living in abusive environments may benefit from information on needed and/or available resources and services. It is crucial to screen all women for abuse, especially those who drink frequently or heavily.