

Health Care Professionals’ Attitudes and Knowledge about FASDs: Findings from The Arc’s FASD Needs Assessment

No Amount of Alcohol is Safe During Pregnancy, However Too Many Women are Misinformed

How often have you heard someone say...

- “It’s just one glass of wine.”
- “My doctor told me it would help relieve my stress.”
- “My mother drank while she was pregnant with me and I’m fine.”

An alarming 41% of respondents to a 2014 NBC Today poll¹ (n = 34,000) answered YES to the question, “Did you, or do you, drink alcohol while pregnant?”

*The fact is, drinking alcohol while pregnant is the only cause of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASDs). FASDs are 100% preventable.*²

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASDs) are a medical diagnosis that describes a group of conditions that can occur in a person whose biological mother drank alcohol during pregnancy. These conditions include Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, alcohol-related neurodevelopmental disorder, and alcohol related birth defects and ranging from mild to severe disabilities. People with FASDs can have intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) which may result in difficulties with learning, judgement, problem solving, physical aptitude, speech, hearing, social skills, and behavioral problems. In 2006, an estimated 1% of all newborns are impacted.³

While it’s true that some women who consume alcohol during pregnancy give birth to children who do not have FASDs, experts cannot predict how much alcohol is safe to consume during pregnancy since it depends on:

- The amount of alcohol consumed;
- How quickly the alcohol is consumed;
- The height and weight of the pregnant woman; and
- The amount of food in the woman’s stomach at the time of alcohol consumption.⁴

For these reasons, experts such as The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other global leaders including the World Health Organization, Canada FASD Research Network, and European FASD Alliance advise that no amount of alcohol is safe during pregnancy.

The Arc’s Needs Assessment

To better understand health care professionals’ attitudes and knowledge about FASDs, an online survey was developed and disseminated. The full report, [The Arc’s FASD Needs Assessment Technical Report](#), has additional information about the survey and results. Table 1 lists the categories, numbers and percentages of survey respondents.

Table 1: Survey Participants’ Profession Category (n = 364)

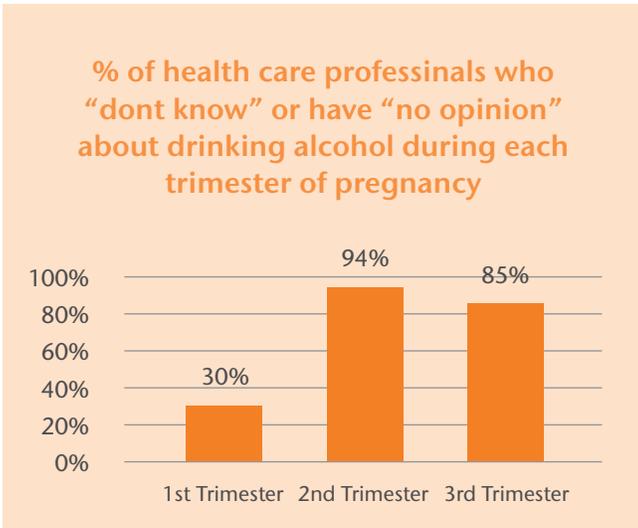
Profession	#	%
Registered nurse	213	59%
Nurse practitioner	42	12%
Therapist/counselor/case manager	39	11%
Midwife	39	11%
Physician	31	9%

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What are health care professionals' opinions on drinking alcohol during pregnancy?

The majority of health care professionals surveyed (91%; n = 385) do not think that drinking alcohol "during any period of pregnancy" is safe.



However, there is substantial difference of professional opinion depending on the trimester of pregnancy. The vast majority of respondents, 91% (n = 380), agree that occasional alcohol consumption (1-2 drinks/week) during the first trimester is NOT safe. However, none of the respondents expressed such certainty regarding occasional consumption in the 2nd or 3rd trimester.

- Ninety-four percent (94%, n = 375) of respondents reported that they either "don't know" or have "no opinion" about whether occasionally drinking alcohol during the 2nd trimester is safe.
- Eighty-five percent (85%) expressed the same uncertainty about drinking during the 3rd trimester.

Similar differences of opinion were expressed about the volume and frequency of alcohol consumption during pregnancy:

- Nearly all respondents (99.7%, n = 375) indicated that they either "don't know" or have "no opinion" about the safety of regular or frequent alcohol consumption during any part of pregnancy.
- 23% indicated that one drink (1.5oz of liquor, 12oz of beer, or 5oz glass of wine) per week can be safely consumed during pregnancy without risk of adverse pregnancy outcomes, while 77% said only zero drinks would be safe.

Do health care professionals feel prepared to address alcohol use and pregnancy?

While the vast majority of respondents (96.2%, n = 423) indicated that they provide care to females of child-bearing age, less than half (42.5%, n = 339) indicated that their practice has a written policy about discussing alcohol use with female patients. Additionally, the majority of respondents (82%, n = 252) indicated that they were responsible for educating, asking, or screening women regarding their alcohol use, however, not all feel prepared to do this (see Table 2).

One in four health professionals surveyed do not feel prepared to conduct alcohol screenings; nearly one in five feel unprepared to both educate pregnant and non-pregnant women about alcohol consumption and pregnancy and to provide resources or referrals for formal treatment.

Table 2: Health professionals' feelings of preparedness

Task	Very or somewhat unprepared	Don't know	Somewhat or very prepared
Conduct alcohol risk screenings (n = 293)	26%	4%	70%
Educate pregnant women about the effects of alcohol on a fetus (n = 292)	19%	3%	78%
Educate non-pregnant women about the effects of alcohol on a fetus (n = 293)	21%	7%	72%
Interview patients about alcohol use (n = 294)	12%	1%	87%
Conduct an intervention (n = 294)	24%	8%	69%
Offer resources/referrals for formal treatment (n = 289)	28%	4%	68%

What is preventing health care professionals from discussing alcohol use and pregnancy?

The health care professionals surveyed also reported that there are multiple obstacles to discussing alcohol use with their patients.

- Time limitations (85%, n = 285) and patient/client sensitivity or denial (89%, n = 285) were obstacles for a vast majority of respondents;
- Over half indicated they experienced discomfort or were unsure how to discuss alcohol use with patients/clients (51%, n = 283) or expressed a need for additional training (65%, n = 284); and
- Over a quarter (76%, n = 283) identified lack of referral sources.

What advice do health care professionals give about pregnancy and alcohol use?

Opinion and practice differed between different types of health care professionals:

- Midwife respondents were nearly three times as likely to agree that consuming alcohol during the third trimester of pregnancy is safe as compared to other respondents.
- Physician respondents were nearly four times as likely to agree that consuming alcohol during the second and third trimester of pregnancy is safe as compared to their colleagues.
- Nurses, on the other hand, are less likely to agree that occasional alcohol use is safe during the second trimester of pregnancy.

This study suggests that while physicians and midwives have the opportunity to interact with women who are pregnant or who are planning on becoming pregnant, they are more likely to provide inaccurate information regarding alcohol use and pregnancy to their patients/clients compared to other professionals.

What resources and training materials are needed?

Health care professionals agreed that it would be beneficial to them to have access to more resources and training materials when discussing alcohol use with female patients/clients yet, they also report that the materials they need are currently unavailable.

Table 3: How helpful would the following kinds of materials be to you?

Materials	Somewhat helpful/ Helpful/ Very helpful	Already available
Updates on current/new research relating to alcohol use (n = 263)	95%	3%
Culturally or linguistically appropriate patient/client education materials (n = 263)	90%	4%
Patient/client education materials on the impact of alcohol on a fetus during pregnancy (n = 263)	90%	8%
Recommendations on how to incorporate alcohol use into general wellness discussions (n = 263)	89%	4%
Information on motivational interviewing techniques to improve alcohol-related discussions (n = 263)	86%	7%
Training on assessment and consulting techniques (n = 263)	86%	4.2%
Incorporation of patient/client education materials and alcohol-related screening tools into Electronic Health Records (n = 263)	83%	6.1%

Table 4 illustrates in which format respondents prefer receiving training materials. Hardcopies of training materials, on-line courses, onsite and virtual training (e.g. videos/webinars), and smartphone apps were all indicated as being helpful by over half of respondents.

Table 4: How helpful would the following types of FASD-related training and educational materials be if they became available?

Materials	Somewhat helpful/ Helpful/ Very helpful	Already available
Paper manuals or reference guides (n = 270)	89%	3%
Online CME-credit courses (n = 266)	86%	2%
Online manuals or reference guides (n = 267)	76%	3%
On-site training for myself and colleagues (n = 266)	74%	1%
Speakers at regional conferences (n = 265)	70%	2%
Smartphone manuals or reference guides (n = 265)	62%	1%
Online learning opportunities not offering CME credit (n = 266)	54%	2%

Unfortunately, as this study has shown, while the majority (91%) of health care professionals surveyed think drinking alcohol during pregnancy is unsafe, there are still too many who think it is not risky. Health care professionals recognize their responsibility to screen and educate women about their alcohol consumption, however many don't feel prepared to do so due to their own discomfort with the topic as well as a lack of time and resources. The Arc's FASDs Prevention Project can help.

What can you do as a Health Care Professional to Prevent FASD?

The Arc's [FASDs Prevention Project](#) is the go-to place for health care professionals, self-advocates and families to learn more about FASDs. Healthcare professionals who provide care to females of child-bearing age are invited to take advantage of our many [resources](#), including:

- Take our free online course Preventing Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders offered by one of our [partners](#), the [Association of Reproductive Health Professionals](#);
- View our series of FASDs prevention training [videos](#);
- Participate in live [webinars](#) or listen to [archived webinars](#) on a variety of FASDs prevention topics;
- Review the [free FASD Toolkit](#) for materials on alcohol screening and interview tips;
- Order [materials](#) that promote an FASDs prevention-friendly office;
- Learn more about FASDs prevention [news headlines and research notes](#);
- Read the Project [blog](#);
- View the [calendar](#) for upcoming events; and
- Stay up-to-date on Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder prevention by [subscribing](#) to the Project for updates and following @TheArcUS on Twitter.

Advocates can help too! When family, friends, or colleagues say it's OK to drink during pregnancy or when trying to become pregnant, join in The Arc and become an FASDs Prevention Champion by taking the opportunity to share with them the fact that **no amount of alcohol is safe during pregnancy.**

The Arc's Commitment to FASDs Services, Supports and Prevention

The Arc is the largest national community-based organization advocating for and serving people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families. From supporting the early research by Dr. Ken Jones on Fetal Alcohol Spectrum in 1977, to advocating for the FAS Prevention and Education Act in 1998, to creating the 2004 "Sharing Stories, Finding Hope" curriculum that focused on providing supports and services to individuals with FASDs and their families, The Arc has been an important contributor in the FASDs community. The Arc's efforts were further enhanced in 2013 when we received a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Research and Services Administration (Grant number: U1HMC26371) to create resources for physicians, nurses and other health care professionals to support their discussions with women about the dangers of drinking alcohol when pregnant or planning to become pregnant. Learn more at The Arc's FASD Prevention Project website: thearc.org/FASD-Prevention-Project.

Additional Resources

[The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)

[U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders Center for Excellence](#)

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¹Holohan, Megan. (2014). *New study shows no harm from moderate drinking in pregnancy, but experts urge caution.* <http://www.today.com/news/new-study-shows-no-harm-moderate-drinking-pregnancy-experts-urge-2D11849699>

²U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration. (2007). *Preventing FASD: Healthy Women, Healthy Babies.* http://fasdcenter.samhsa.gov/documents/WYNK_Preventing_FASD.pdf

³SAMSHA (2006). *Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders by the Numbers.* http://fasdcenter.samhsa.gov/documents/WYNK_Numbers.pdf

⁴National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. (1997). *Alcohol Alert No. 35; PH 371.* <http://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/aa35.htm>