

Drinking and Pre-pregnancy Risks

In 1981 the Office of the Surgeon General advised pregnant women to limit alcohol consumption. Additional research led the Surgeon General to update this advisory. Today, pregnant women or women who may become pregnant are advised to abstain from all alcohol consumption. New studies show that:

- ◆ There is no known safe level of alcohol consumption.
- ◆ Alcohol can impact fetal development in early weeks of pregnancy.
- ◆ Fetal impacts are irreversible and life-long.¹

Analysis of national 2004 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) data concluded that 53.9% of women with the highest potential for becoming pregnant in the immediate future reported consuming alcohol in the previous month. Of these women, 10.7% reported binge drinking (any occasion of 5+ drinks) and 12.9% reported binge drinking or consuming one or more drinks per day. These high potential pregnancy respondents were those women between the ages of 18 and 44 who were considering becoming pregnant within 12 months, were not using contraception, were not sterile, or were not currently pregnant.²

In Arkansas, the Department of Health administers the BRFSS. The state BRFSS does not currently include questions about the intent to become pregnant, sterility or contraceptive use. However, the drinking patterns of all Arkansas women of childbearing age (see figure at right) indicate that a majority of women ages 18 to 44 consume alcohol, most only occasionally. Nonetheless, a significant number of these women report heavy consumption of alcohol and binge drinking.³ These data, taken together with the high rate of unintended pregnancies (as many as half

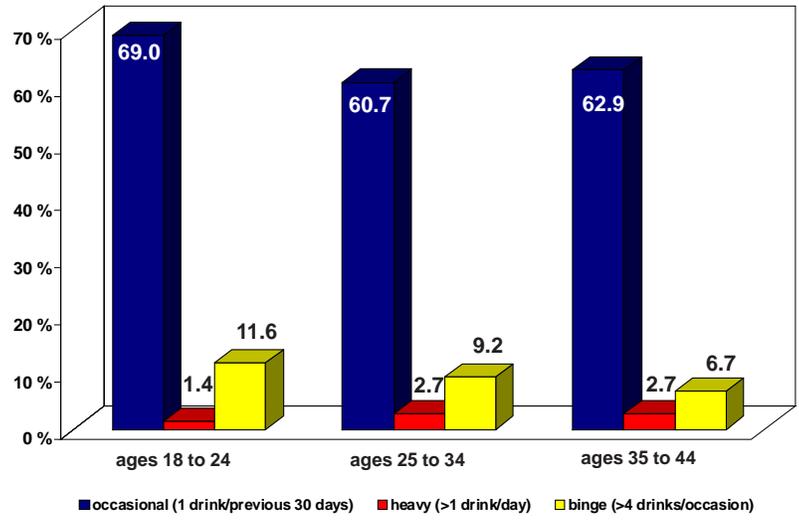
according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), and the initial detection of most pregnancies occurring several weeks after conception, could indicate that many Arkansas women may be unknowingly consuming high levels of alcohol in the earliest weeks of pregnancy.

Prevention messages addressing abstinence from alcohol during pregnancy have been effective. Data indicate that once pregnancy is confirmed, the overwhelming majority of women abstain from alcohol consumption or greatly decrease consumption. However, new strategies may need to be developed to address alcohol consumption in the earliest weeks of pregnancy before pregnancy is known.

Prenatal Exposure

Prenatal exposure to alcohol can cause a range of disorders in offspring known as fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASDs), an umbrella term describing such lifelong effects as physical, mental, behavioral and/or learning disabilities. One of the most severe effects of drinking during pregnancy is fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS), a leading preventable cause of mental retardation and birth defects.⁴ All FASDs are 100% preventable if pregnant women or women who may become pregnant avoid all alcohol consumption.

2007 Drinking Patterns of Women Ages 18 - 44



¹ Information from the Office of the Surgeon General, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov>.

² Anderson, J.E., Ebrahim, S., Floyd, L., Atrash, H. (2006). "Prevalence of Risk Factors for Adverse Pregnancy Outcomes During Pregnancy and the Preconception Period—United States, 2002-2004." *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, 10, S101-S106.

³ Information from the Arkansas Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, <http://brfss.arkansas.gov>.

⁴ Information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/fas/>.

Coming next month:

Task Force on Substance Abuse Annual Report