



# Information for Service Women: Perinatal Alcohol Use and Risks

## Using alcohol while pregnant can be extremely harmful to fetal development and fetal safety.

*This resource will discuss how to recognize and treat Postpartum Depression, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, and the relationship between alcohol and breastfeeding.*

- There is **NO** “safe” threshold or pattern of alcohol consumption during pregnancy.
- Alcohol use during pregnancy may result in Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS).
- Post-natal use of alcohol, especially when breastfeeding, may cause harm to infant development.
- Post-natal mental health conditions like Postpartum Depression (PPD) may increase risk of use and dependence on alcohol.

## Understanding Postpartum Depression and Mental Health Impacts on Alcohol Use

*It is important to be able to recognize the signs and symptoms of PPD as it may contribute to feelings of dependence on alcohol.*

### Signs and Symptoms



+ **Emotional Changes:** Frequent mood swings, including crying spells and irritability, are **common with PPD**. New mothers can also experience feelings of **sadness, anxiety, and hopelessness**.



+ **Physical Symptoms:** PPD can cause **fatigue, changes in appetite, and sleep problems**.



+ **Cognitive Symptoms:** PPD can cause **difficulty concentrating, making decisions, or remembering** things that occur.

### Seeking Help

*PPD is treatable, and seeking help from a healthcare professional is important for both the mother and baby.*



+ **Therapy:** Therapy can help new mothers **cope with their emotions** and develop **healthy coping mechanisms**.



+ **Medications:** Antidepressants can be helpful for some new mothers who are experiencing **severe symptoms of postpartum depression**.



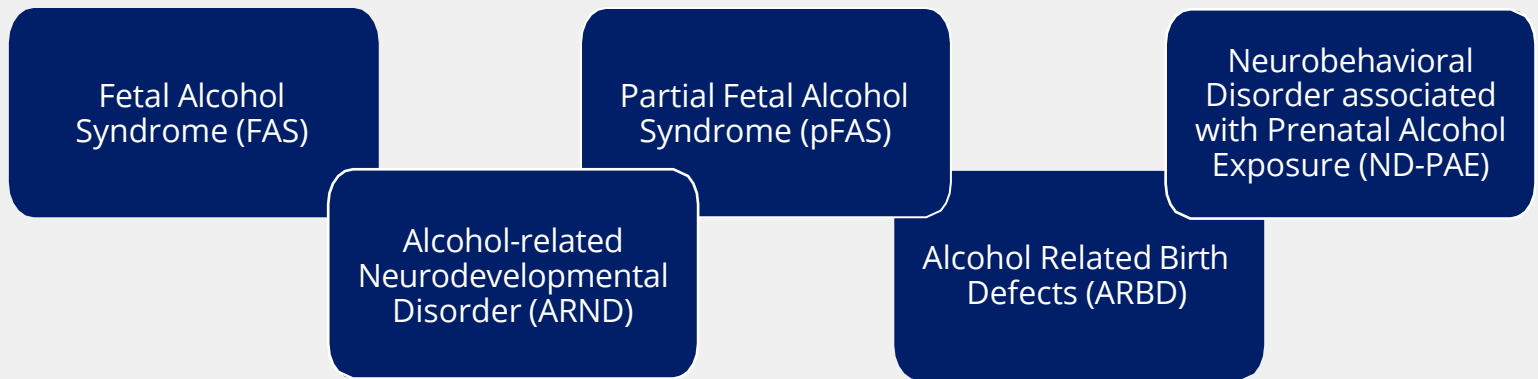
+ **Support Groups:** Connecting with other **new mothers who are going through similar experiences** can be very beneficial.

If you are struggling with perinatal mental health, please utilize the [National Maternal Mental Health Hotline \(1-833-TLC-MAMA\)](#).

For more information on PPD, please see pages 10 and 11 in the [Postpartum Return to Duty Guide](#).

## What is Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS)?

FAS refers to a group of conditions with ranging clinical presentations in terms of severity. These conditions include:



## How Alcohol Impacts Fetal Development

*Even before development and birth, alcohol directly causes malformations of an embryo, or fertilized egg. Given this, service members trying to get pregnant should avoid alcohol.*

- A fetus is particularly vulnerable to negative impacts from alcohol exposure because they are unable to process and eliminate alcohol in their system as quickly and effectively as an adult can.
  - Additionally, much of the alcohol consumed while pregnant is eliminated into the amniotic sac, the protective fluid surrounding the fetus during pregnancy, and is then re-introduced to the fetus as it swallows amniotic fluid.
- Prenatal alcohol exposure is the leading preventable cause of congenital anomalies and developmental disabilities in infants.

### Exposure by Trimester

- Exposure to alcohol during the **First Trimester** can contribute to facial anomalies and major structural organ anomalies.
- Exposure to alcohol during the **Second Trimester** can contribute to risk of spontaneous abortion.
- Exposure to alcohol during the **Third Trimester** can negatively affect weight, length and brain growth.

## Recognizing the Physical Features of FAS

### Physical Abnormalities:

- Abnormal prenatal or postnatal infant growth.
- Changes in facial features:
  - Short palpebral fissures or short eye lids.
  - Thin vermilion border or a thin upper lip.
  - Smooth philtrum or a smooth upper lip.

### Central Nervous System Abnormalities:

- Structural: limited brain size and development.
- Neurological: abnormal reflexes, muscle tone, cranial nerve abnormalities or recurring seizures.
- Functional: decreased cognitive capability, intellectual disability, trouble with reading or spelling, difficulty with critical thinking, memory issues, poor motor skills, and with hyperactivity.

## Talk to your physician about Fetal Alcohol Syndrome if:

- If you consumed alcohol at ANY point during pregnancy.
- If there is ANY parental or caregiver concern about perinatal alcohol use, even if unknown or alcohol use was denied.
- If ANY of the 3 characteristic features described above are present or may be present, even if alcohol exposure is unknown.

*Talking to a provider can connect you with early intervention services and improve the development of children with FAS.*

## Considerations for Alcohol Use When Breastfeeding

There is no **“safe”** amount of alcohol use when breastfeeding. It is safest not to drink alcohol if you are breastfeeding.

- However, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [states](#) that drinking up to one standard drink a day at least two hours before breastfeeding is not known to be harmful for a baby.

- *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Breastfeeding Special Circumstances, February 2024*

### • One standard drink is defined as:



12 ounces (oz)  
of regular beer



8 -10 oz of  
malt liquor or  
hard seltzer



5 oz of table  
wine



1.5 oz of  
brandy or  
cognac



2 – 3 oz of  
liqueur



1.5 oz shot of  
spirits (gin, rum,  
tequila, vodka,  
etc.)

- Alcohol levels are usually highest in breast milk 30 minutes to an hour after consuming an alcoholic beverage.
- However, alcohol can be detected in breast milk for 2 - 3 hours per drink after it is consumed.
- The more alcohol one consumes, the longer alcohol can be detected in breast milk and the greater the effect on the baby.
- If consuming alcohol, delay breastfeeding or pumping for feeding at least 2 hours for each alcoholic drink you consume or use previously stored breast milk that was pumped before alcohol consumption for feeding.
- If breasts become full while waiting for the alcohol to clear, you can hand express or pump, discarding the milk that you express.

## The Impacts of Alcohol on Newborn Infants

- A newborn has an immature liver and will experience greater negative impacts from alcohol exposure. Up until about 3 months of age, infants metabolize alcohol at about half the rate of adults.

### Given this alcohol can cause health risks to infants including:

- Sleep disturbances
- Increased startling and arousal
- Decreased weight gain
- Increased crying
- Decreased milk intake

## Service Specific Resources

### Seeking Help for Alcohol Use



- Your local Substance Abuse Rehabilitation Program (SARP), where members are eligible to receive voluntary alcohol misuse care, without requiring a referral or coordination with one's command or drug and alcohol program advisor (DAPA).
- [Too Much To Lose](#), a Defense of Department (DoD) educational campaign, aligned to the Defense Health Agency (DHA), for the U.S. military service members.
- [Own Your Limits](#), a DoD educational campaign to help service members learn how to drink responsibly, if they choose to drink alcohol.
- [Navy Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention](#), which promotes readiness, health and wellness through the prevention and treatment of substance abuse.