

Even a little alcohol in pregnancy seen risky

Last Updated: 2007-02-16 14:33:30 -0400 (Reuters Health)

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - Having less than one [alcoholic](#) drink a week during the first trimester of pregnancy may have negative long-term effects on the mental health of offspring, primarily girls, UK researchers report.

While heavy alcohol intake during pregnancy is known to cause physical and mental defects in children, the safety of very small amounts of alcohol is unknown, Dr. Kapil Sayal and colleagues from the University of Bristol point out in the journal *Pediatrics*.

The researchers examined the effect of prenatal exposure to various levels of alcohol in a population-based study. They expected only higher levels of alcohol would be linked to mental health problems, and that these would mainly affect boys.

Data came from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children, which had information on mother' self-reported use of alcohol in the first trimester and on mental health problems in up to 9000 children from 4 to 9 years of age.

Among the mothers, 44 percent said they consumed no alcohol during the first trimester of pregnancy; 40 percent reported that they consumed less than one drink per week; and 16 percent reported consuming more than one drink per week, according to the report.

Sayal's team found that, after taking a wide range of other factors into account, consumption of less than one drink per week during early pregnancy was associated with clinically significant mental health problems.

In further contrast to the authors' expectations, this association was more evident in girls.

The investigators emphasize that, given this unexpected gender-specific effect as well as the lack of a clear dose-response relationship in this study, "these findings should be considered preliminary and need additional investigation."

Nonetheless, because of the uncertainty about a safe cut-off level for alcohol intake, they recommend that women should be advised to abstain from all alcohol during pregnancy.

SOURCE: *Pediatrics*, February 2007.

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