

Stop Mommy-Shaming Pregnant Women Who Have a Glass of Wine



By Alex Berezow, PhD — October 12, 2017



Credit: Public Domain/Wikipedia [1]

The other night, I had dinner with one of my best childhood friends who became an OB/GYN. She has three amazing children and was pregnant with her fourth.

Trigger warning: She ordered a glass of wine. And drank it.

I warned her that there was a [lunatic on Twitter with a master's degree in photojournalism who pretends to be a science journalist](#) [2] that would be publicly mommy-shaming her into submission. She shrugged. A little bit of alcohol isn't going to hurt.

Of course, she's right. But when it comes to alcohol, the United States is incredibly puritanical. Our society has promoted the view that even a single drop of alcohol is harmful to developing babies. However, the totality of evidence does not support that belief.

Women in other countries readily admit to drinking while pregnant. A [study](#) [3] published in *BMJ Open* found that 40% of Australian, 56% of New Zealander, 75% of British, and 82% of Irish women drank during pregnancy. Do these countries have higher rates of birth defects? No. According to the [March of Dimes](#) [4], the rate of birth defects per 1,000 live births in the U.S. is 47.8, which is higher than the rate in Australia (41.7), United Kingdom (43.8), and New Zealand (46.7). Only Ireland has a higher rate (53.0).

Naturally, heavy drinking while pregnant is a terrible idea. That can lead to fetal alcohol syndrome, the prevalence of which is higher in the UK, Ireland, and New Zealand than in the U.S., according to [The Lancet Global Health](#) [5]. Interestingly, however, Australia's rate of fetal alcohol syndrome is the lowest of all five countries, and indeed, one of the lowest in the world (if we exclude all the

Middle Eastern countries where alcohol is illegal).

The UK's National Health Service (NHS) advises:

"[A]lcohol should be avoided during the first three months of pregnancy. Beyond three months, a safe level of alcohol has not been firmly established, though the guidance states there is no evidence of harm from drinking a maximum of 1-2 units once or twice a week."

This is sensible advice. The toxic effect of alcohol, just like any other molecule, depends on the dose. Out of an abundance of caution, a pregnant mother may choose to forgo alcohol entirely. But a woman who chooses to have an occasional drink isn't doing anything wrong. Declaring otherwise is fearmongering and mommy-shaming.

Shame, Shame, I Know Your Name

Alcohol isn't the only thing pregnant women are being shamed over. My friend told me that one late night in the delivery room, the husband of a pregnant woman who was about to deliver was not happy that the OB/GYN was pregnant. "Should you be working?" he kept asking her. She didn't respond well. (It was probably the hormones.)

[Madame Noire](#) [6], a magazine that caters to African-American women, warns against manicures (chemicals!), exercise, teeth whitening products, household cleaners, yoga, hot tubs, roller coasters, bikini waxes, and loud noises. Can pregnant women sleep? Sure, but only if it's on their left side. To be completely safe, women could not sleep at all -- which is good practice for what will happen after the baby arrives, anyway.

Given all the pregnancy nonsense that women are warned about, one could be forgiven for thinking that the only safe thing for women to do is to stay home, preferably barefoot ([no high heels](#) [7], ladies!) and in the kitchen baking cookies. Oh, and be sure that the cookies don't contain sugar, or [your baby might die of asthma](#) [8].

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[1] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pregnancy#/media/File:PregnantWoman.jpg>

[2] <http://www.tarahaelle.net/bio/>

[3] <http://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/5/7/e006323>

[4] <https://www.marchofdimes.org/materials/global-report-on-birth-defects-the-hidden-toll-of-dying-and-disabled-children-full-report.pdf>

[5] [http://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/langlo/PIIS2214-109X\(17\)30021-9.pdf](http://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/langlo/PIIS2214-109X(17)30021-9.pdf)

[6] <http://madamenoire.com/711304/pregnant-women/>

[7] http://www.momjunction.com/articles/risks-wearing-heels-pregnancy_0075253/#gref

[8] <http://www.cnn.com/2017/07/05/health/sugar-pregnancy-child-allergy-asthma-study/index.html>