

Prevention Without Harm

Best Practices for Talking about Prenatal Alcohol Exposure (PAE)



Prevention messaging is undoubtedly important, but it is often where judgmental language occurs. Rather than decreasing prenatal alcohol use, fear- or shame-based messaging may push those who are pregnant away from support and care when they need it most.

Principles of Responsible Prevention Language

- 1. Prevent the exposure, not the person:** The goal should be fewer alcohol-exposed pregnancies. Take care to not imply that people with FASD are the problem.
- 2. Share responsibility:** Partners, families, healthcare providers, and policymakers all have a role in preventing prenatal alcohol exposure, not just those who are pregnant.
- 3. Accuracy over alarm:** Be honest about the knowns and the unknowns. "No known safe amount or time" is true, while "100% preventable" is not.
- 4. Support, don't police:** Punitive framing can drive people away from prenatal care. Use language and framing that connects people to support.
- 5. Lead with hope:** Pair your prevention messages with messages of support and strength. Note that stopping drinking at any time during pregnancy is beneficial to fetal development.

Why it Matters

More than 1 in 7 pregnancies are exposed to alcohol.¹ Sharing accurate, non-judgmental public health messaging and resources can help people choose alcohol-free pregnancies.

Around 4 in 10 pregnancies are unplanned.² Many people drink before they know they are pregnant. Blame-based messaging ignores this reality.

Non-judgmental conversations work: 83% of healthcare professionals who routinely screen for alcohol use report positive changes in patients.³

People deserve support, not shame or blame. Avoiding harmful language and replacing it with empowering alternatives can uplift individuals and families.



We do not recommend describing FASD as “100% preventable.”

- There are many social determinants of health that can influence prenatal alcohol exposure, requiring a nuanced discussion that avoids oversimplifying.
- "100% preventable" language can unintentionally place blame and guilt on those who experience prenatal alcohol use.
- Language that suggests people with disabilities should be prevented can be dehumanizing. It is recommended to focus on preventing *prenatal alcohol exposure*, not FASD.

It is important to use non-judgmental language when discussing families. By using positive language, the same information can be conveyed in a way that uplifts and affirms families.

Try saying this:



FASD can occur when a pregnancy is exposed to alcohol.



No amount of alcohol is safe during pregnancy.



Confirmed prenatal alcohol exposure

Instead of this:

FASD is caused by a woman drinking during pregnancy.

Don't drink during pregnancy.

Admitted to drinking

Sources

1. Thomas, S.A., Gosdin, L.K., Terplan, M., Kim, S.Y., & Deputy N.P. (2026). Alcohol consumption during pregnancy among women aged 18–49 Years — United States, 2021–2024. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep*, 75:280–284. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm7522a2>.

2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2024). Unintended pregnancy. <https://www.cdc.gov/reproductive-health/hcp/unintended-pregnancy/index.html>

3. CDC. (2023) Let's Talk-Communicating about alcohol and pregnancy. Retrieved November 10, 2023, from [Let'sTalkCommunicationGuide-508.pdf \(cdc.gov\)](https://www.cdc.gov/letstalkcommunicationguide-508.pdf)

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