

SUMMARY REPORT

Alcohol and breastfeeding: Beliefs, attitudes, knowledge and behaviours

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fare

Foundation for Alcohol
Research & Education

About this survey

The Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) commissioned Kantar Public, Australia's leading insights and advisory agency to government and not-for-profit organisations, to undertake foundational research into the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours of women and health professionals in relation to alcohol and breastfeeding.

The study comprised three phases; a rapid literature review, qualitative research with people who were breastfeeding or had recently breastfed and health professionals, and a survey. This summary report provides an overview of the key findings from the survey.

The primary purpose of the research was to gain an understanding of the beliefs, attitudes, knowledge and behaviours of people who were breastfeeding or had recently breastfed in relation to alcohol use when breastfeeding.

Methodology

An online survey was conducted with a representative sample of 605 Australian women aged 18 – 44 who were breastfeeding or who had breastfed in the past two years. Women who stated they did not usually drink alcohol (i.e. when not pregnant or breastfeeding) were screened out of the survey, along with women working in certain fields (e.g. midwives, lactation consultants, drug & alcohol advice/ support workers, and people involved in alcohol, advertising or market/ social research industries).

The questionnaire defined breastfeeding as including “feeding breastmilk via a bottle, directly by breast, and mixed feeding (where a person uses a combination of formula and breastmilk to feed their child).”

Because the demographic profile of the target audience was not known in advance, a four-stage process was used to establish the profile and achieve a representative final sample.

STAGE 1

A representative sample of 2,006 women aged 18–44 completed a screener survey to establish their age, geographical location, level of education, breastfeeding status and alcohol usage. Quotas for the screener survey were set based on the known profile of all women aged 18–44 in Australia, according to ABS census data (2016). Approximately 20 per cent of women initially screened were breastfeeding or had breastfed in the past two years and did not usually avoid alcohol altogether. These 466 women completed the full survey.

STAGE 2

Fieldwork was paused and the screening data was weighted to correct for minor differences between the screener quotas and the achieved screener sample.

STAGE 3

The weighted data was used to provide a demographic profile for the target audience.

STAGE 4

Additional women aged 18–44 were invited to complete the screener and, if eligible, the full survey. The demographic profile for the target audience was used to manage and target these additional invites, and to set quotas for full survey completion (age band, level of education, state, capital cities/rest of Australia), thereby providing a representative final sample of the target audience (n = 605).

The survey aimed to measure the prevalence of behaviours, knowledge and attitudes in relation to alcohol and breastfeeding, as identified during the qualitative exploration. The mean survey length was 11 minutes, with fieldwork undertaken in February 2022.

Key findings

Alcohol and breastfeeding behaviour

Drinking alcohol at some stage while breastfeeding was common among the women surveyed, with 65 per cent having consumed at least some alcohol over the time they had been breastfeeding. Survey respondents were asked to indicate their alcohol consumption 'while they were breastfeeding', which was defined as 'drinking any alcohol at any point during a day that you breastfed'.

ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION WHILE BREASTFEEDING	
Never	35%
NET – have consumed some alcohol	65%
Only on special occasions	22%
Monthly or less	12%
2 – 3 times per month	9%
Once a week	9%
2 – 3 times a week	8%
4+ times a week	5%

Q - If currently breastfeeding: While you have been breastfeeding, how often, if at all, do you have a drink containing alcohol, including just a few sips? If this has varied over the time you have been breastfeeding, please think about the last month.

Q - If lapsed breastfeeding: Thinking about while you were breastfeeding, how often, if at all, did you have a drink containing alcohol, including just a few sips? If this varied over the time you were breastfeeding, please think about the last month that you were breastfeeding.

Throughout this survey, when we talk about 'drinking alcohol while breastfeeding', we mean drinking any alcohol at any point during a day that you breastfed.

Base: Total sample (n=605)

Most breastfeeding women drinking alcohol (82 per cent) did not exceed two standard drinks per day, on a typical day when drinking.

NUMBER OF STANDARD DRINKS CONSUMED WHILE BREASTFEEDING ON A TYPICAL DAY WHEN DRINKING	
A few sips	14%
Half a drink	17%
1 – 2 drinks	51%
NET – consumed 2 or fewer drinks per day	82%
3 – 4 drinks	10%
5 – 6 drinks	5%
7 – 9 drinks	2%
10 or more drinks	1%

Q - *If currently breastfeeding: While you have been breastfeeding, how many standard drinks of alcohol do you drink on a typical day when you are drinking? If this has varied over the time you have been breastfeeding, please think about the last month. If you are not sure, please provide your best estimate.*

Q - *If lapsed breastfeeding: Thinking about while you were breastfeeding, how many standard drinks of alcohol did you drink on a typical day when you were drinking? If this varied over the time you were breastfeeding, please think about the last month that you were breastfeeding. If you are not sure, please provide your best estimate.*

Throughout this survey, when we talk about 'drinking alcohol while breastfeeding', we mean drinking any alcohol at any point during a day that you breastfed.

Base: Those who had consumed some alcohol over the breastfeeding period (n=383).

It was common among women who had consumed alcohol while breastfeeding to have consumed five or more drinks on an occasion (72 per cent). For many, this only occurred on special occasions (41 per cent), or less than monthly (14 per cent).

CONSUMPTION OF 5 OR MORE DRINKS ON ANY ONE OCCASION WHILE BREASTFEEDING	
Never	28%
NET – consumed 5 or more drinks on occasion	72%
Only on special occasions	41%
Less than monthly	14%
Monthly	9%
Weekly	6%
Daily or almost daily	2%

Q - *If currently breastfeeding: While you have been breastfeeding, how often, if at all, have you had 5 or more drinks on one occasion? If this has varied over the time you have been breastfeeding, please think about the last month. If you are not sure, please provide your best estimate.*

Q - *If lapsed breastfeeding: Thinking about while you were breastfeeding, how often, if at all, did you have 5 or more drinks on one occasion? If this varied over the time you were breastfeeding, please think about the last month that you were breastfeeding. If you are not sure, please provide your best estimate.*

Base: Those who had consumed some alcohol over the breastfeeding period (n=383).

Factors associated with alcohol consumption while breastfeeding

Survey respondents who had higher educational attainment (undergraduate degree or higher) were more likely to consume alcohol while breastfeeding than respondents who had lower educational attainment.

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND DRINKING ALCOHOL WHILE BREASTFEEDING		
	Consumed at least some alcohol	Consumed alcohol at least once/week
Higher educational attainment (undergraduate degree or higher)	75%	33%
Lower educational attainment (TAFE, diploma, certificate or lower)	60%	16%

Women who were breastfeeding an infant up to six weeks old were significantly more likely to not have consumed any alcohol (72 per cent) than those who were breastfeeding a child aged six weeks or older (30 per cent).

AGE OF INFANT AND DRINKING ALCOHOL WHILE BREASTFEEDING

	Infant aged up to 6 weeks	Infant aged 6 weeks or more
Have not consumed any alcohol when breastfeeding	72%	30%

Awareness of the Alcohol Guidelines

Among women who were breastfeeding, there was limited awareness of the National Health and Medical Research Council's Australian Guidelines to reduce health risks from drinking alcohol (the Guidelines) for breastfeeding; only one-third (35 per cent) had heard of any Australian guidelines regarding alcohol consumption for women who are breastfeeding.

AWARENESS OF AUSTRALIAN ALCOHOL GUIDELINES FOR WOMEN WHO ARE BREASTFEEDING

Yes – have heard of the Guideline	35%
No – have not heard of the Guideline	65%

Q - Have you heard of any Australian Alcohol Guidelines for women who are breastfeeding?

Base: Total sample (n=605).

Awareness and understanding of risks

Among the women surveyed, awareness of risk was focused on the long-term and physical risks, with lower awareness of potential short-term risks such as problems with feeding or reduced flow. When prompted with potential risks to the baby/child of drinking alcohol while breastfeeding, the most commonly cited risks were 'damage to brain development' (69 per cent) and 'problems with growth and development' (66 per cent).

AWARENESS OF RISKS OF ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION WHILE BREASTFEEDING

Damage to brain development	69%
Problems with growth and development	66%
Accidental physical harm to baby (e.g. dropping baby)	60%
Increased risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS)	58%
Problems with the baby's sleeping	57%
Long-term behavioural problems	52%
Damage to nervous system development	49%
Problems with the baby's feeding	45%
Reduced milk production	43%
Reduced flow of milk	38%
Damage to spinal cord development	25%
Don't know	4%
None of these	1%

Q - Which of these, if any, do you think are risks to the baby of a person drinking alcohol while breastfeeding?

Base: Total sample (n = 605).

When asked how much they felt they knew about the ‘risks and potential outcomes associated with drinking alcohol while breastfeeding’, only one-third (32 per cent) claimed to fully understand the risks and potential outcomes.

SELF-REPORTED UNDERSTANDING OF RISKS AND POTENTIAL OUTCOMES ASSOCIATED WITH DRINKING ALCOHOL WHILE BREASTFEEDING	
I fully understand the risks and potential outcomes	32%
I have some understanding of the risks and potential outcomes	44%
I know there are risks and potential outcomes, but I don't know much about them	21%
I don't know anything about the risks and potential outcomes	2%
NET – do not fully understand the risks and potential outcomes	67%

Q - Which of the following best describes how much you feel you know about the risks and potential outcomes associated with drinking alcohol while breastfeeding?

Base: Total sample (n = 605).

Knowledge gaps

There were several misconceptions about alcohol and breastfeeding that may contribute to alcohol consumption while breastfeeding. Survey respondents were presented with a list of statements relating to the risks of alcohol consumption and breastfeeding, some of which were accurate and some of which were inaccurate, and asked to indicate whether each statement was correct or incorrect.

One-third (33 per cent) of breastfeeding women believed that ‘for a baby to be impacted by alcohol from breastfeeding, the mother would need to be drinking very large amounts of alcohol’, and a further 14 per cent were unsure if this statement was correct or incorrect (net: 47 per cent).

There was also a lack of understanding that ‘the concentration/amount of alcohol in a mother’s breast milk is effectively the same as in her bloodstream’, with 24 per cent believing this to be incorrect and 25 per cent unsure (net: 49 per cent).

SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEPTIONS OF RISKS OF DRINKING ALCOHOL WHILE BREASTFEEDING				
	Believed to be correct	Believed to be incorrect	Unsure	NET unsure/incorrect
For a baby to be impacted by alcohol from breastmilk the mother would need to be drinking large amounts of alcohol (incorrect)	33%	53%	14%	47%
The concentration of alcohol in a mother’s breastmilk is the same as in her bloodstream (correct)	51%	24%	25%	49%

Q - Please indicate whether each of the following statements are correct or incorrect?

Base: Total sample (n = 605).

Understanding of strategies to prevent harm

The majority (93 per cent) of women surveyed who had consumed some alcohol while breastfeeding reported using some sort of ‘harm minimisation strategy’. However, these included approaches that do not align with the advice contained in the Guidelines, such as limiting the amount of alcohol consumed to no more than two drinks per day (28 per cent) and ‘pumping and dumping with an aim to remove the alcohol from the breastmilk before breastfeeding’ (25 per cent).

Only 39 per cent of breastfeeding women who had consumed alcohol while breastfeeding had calculated how long to wait based on the number of standard drinks, or had done this with the help of an app.

STRATEGIES USED TO PREVENT HARM FROM DRINKING ALCOHOL WHILE BREASTFEEDING	
If planning to drink alcohol, express milk in advance to feed the baby	42%
NET – calculated wait time based on standard drinks or using an app	39%
Limit alcohol consumed to no more than 2 drinks a day while breastfeeding	28%
After drinking, calculate how long to wait before breastfeeding, based on the number of standard drinks	28%
‘Pumping and dumping’ with the aim of removing alcohol from breastmilk before breastfeeding	25%
Drink extra water if drinking alcohol while breastfeeding	23%
Replace breastmilk with formula for the first feed after drinking alcohol	23%
Use an app to calculate how long to wait between drinking alcohol and breastfeeding	22%
Only drink alcohol at night-time, just after the baby has gone to sleep	16%
Make sure to eat enough food if drinking alcohol while breastfeeding	15%
Only have low alcohol drinks while breastfeeding	14%
After drinking alcohol, wait for an hour before breastfeeding	10%
Use a test kit to check if there is alcohol in the breastmilk, before breastfeeding	7%
I don’t think these strategies are needed – unlikely to cause harm	6%
Only drink immediately before breastfeeding	6%
Only drink alcohol while the baby is on the breast	5%
Another strategy	2%
NET – one or more strategies	93%
None of these	7%

Q – Have you used any of these strategies to prevent harm to the child when drinking alcohol while breastfeeding? Please select all that apply.

Base: Women who have consumed some alcohol while breastfeeding (n=383).

Key influences

Women who were breastfeeding most commonly cited healthcare professionals as having the most influence on their decisions about alcohol consumption while breastfeeding (63 per cent), as well as being ideal sources for advice on this topic, especially midwives / maternal and child health nurses (MCHNs) (39 per cent) and GPs (37 per cent), followed by the Australian Breastfeeding Association (ABA) (30 per cent).

KEY INFLUENCES ON DECISIONS ABOUT DRINKING ALCOHOL WHILE BREASTFEEDING	
NET – Health professionals	63%
Midwives / MCHNs	39%
GP / doctor	37%
Australian Breastfeeding Association	30%
Online research, e.g. Google search	26%
My mother	25%
Friend/s	19%

My partner	18%
Lactation consultant	18%
Online parenting / pregnancy forums	18%
Obstetrician	17%
Mother's group sessions	15%
Breastfeeding apps	14%
Parenting / pregnancy books / magazines	12%
Parenting / pregnancy podcasts	11%
Australian (NHMRC) Alcohol Guidelines	11%
Other family members	10%
Other health professionals	10%
Social media / influencers	10%
Leaflets, e.g. in waiting rooms	7%
Something or someone else	7%
TV / radio	4%

Q - Who or what has had the most influence on your decisions about drinking alcohol while breastfeeding? Please select all that apply.

Base: Total sample (n = 605).



About the Campaign

FARE received funding from the Australian Government to develop and deliver the 'National Awareness Campaign for Pregnancy and Breastfeeding Women' (the Campaign) from July 2020 to September 2024.

Launched in November 2021, the campaign aims to:

- increase Australians' awareness of the risks associated with consumption of alcohol during pregnancy and while breastfeeding, including Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)
- increase the proportion of Australians who are aware that alcohol should not be consumed during pregnancy and that it is safest to not drink alcohol when breastfeeding
- increase the proportion of Australian women who intend to not drink any alcohol during pregnancy and when breastfeeding.

For more information visit www.everymomentmatters.org.au

About FARE

The Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) is the leading not-for-profit organisation working towards an Australia free from alcohol harms.

We approach this through developing evidence-informed policy, enabling people-powered advocacy and delivering health promotion programs.

Working with local communities, values-aligned organisations, health professionals and researchers across the country, we strive to improve the health and wellbeing of everyone in Australia.

To learn more about us and our work visit www.fare.org.au.



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