Well Woman and Prenatal Visits Should Include Alcohol Abuse Screening

According to a new Committee Opinion released by The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists in July 2011, women should be screened for alcohol use at least yearly and within the first trimester of pregnancy. The new recommendations highlight the ob-gyn’s role in identifying women who drink at unhealthy levels, encouraging healthy behaviors through brief intervention and education, and referring alcohol-dependent patients for treatment.

At-risk alcohol use, defined by ACOG as more than seven drink per week, more than three drinks per occasion (binge drinking), or any amount of consumption among those who are pregnant or at risk of pregnancy, is on the rise among women. According to ACOG, thirteen percent of women in the U.S. consume more than seven drinks per week. Among 18-34 year olds who binge drink, almost one third report drinking eight or more drinks per occasion.

According to ACOG, high levels of alcohol consumption can result in multiple adverse effects in women including decreased fertility; menstrual disorders; injuries; an increased risk of breast, liver, rectal, mouth, throat, and esophageal cancers; seizures; and malnutrition. Psychosocial problems such as loss of income, child neglect or abuse, altered judgment, driving under the influence, and depression can also occur. Binge drinking, in particular, is associated with a sudden peak in blood alcohol level resulting in unsafe behavior and a higher risk of damage to organs and reproductive function, according to ACOG.

The Committee Opinion states that alcohol-related mortality is the third leading cause of preventable death among women in the U.S. Alcohol is toxic to fetuses and its
use during pregnancy is associated with growth impairment, facial abnormalities, central nervous system impairment, behavioral disorders, and impaired intellectual development.

The new Committee Opinion from ACOG provides guidance to ob-gyns for talking to patients about alcohol use and includes screening tests that identify at-risk drinking patterns, information on when and how to refer alcohol-dependent women for professional treatment, a chart of standard drink measurements, and additional resources.

For more information about this issue, please see Committee Opinion #496 “At-Risk Drinking and Alcohol Dependence: Obstetric and Gynecologic Implications” which is published in the August 2011 journal Obstetrics and Gynecology.

For further information regarding this article, please contact Karen Kuehn Howell, Ph.D., the Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project, Emory University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, 1256 Briarcliff Road, N.E., 309W, Atlanta, Georgia, 30306. You can also phone us at 404-712-9829 or visit our website at http://www.emory.edu/MSACD

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