

# Growing Up in New Zealand: How alcohol consumption changes during pregnancy

## RESEARCH SUMMARY

AUGUST 2015

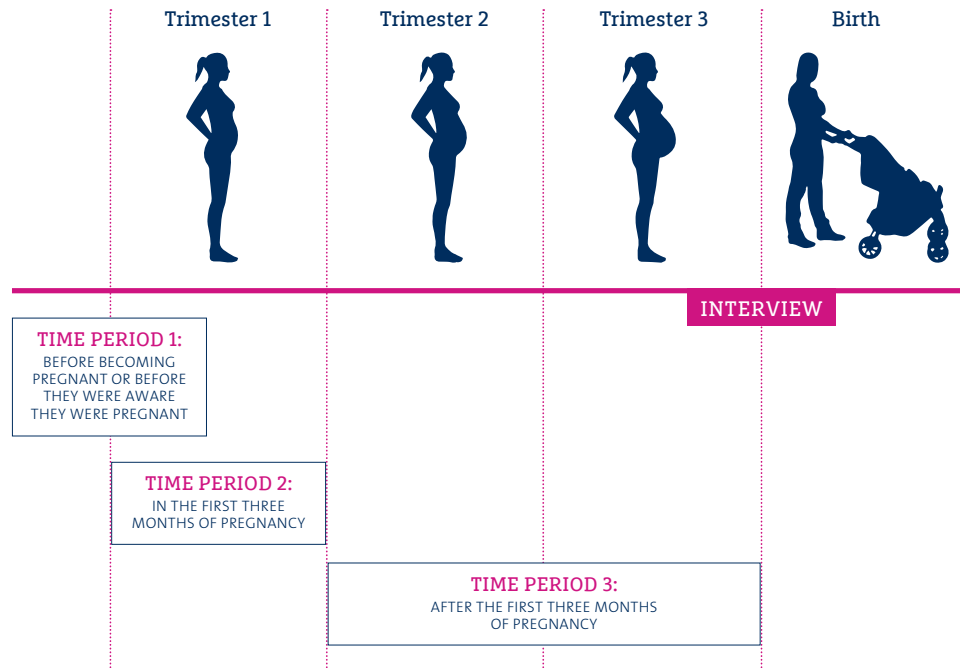
The antenatal environment plays a vital role in the development of the unborn child. Alcohol exposure can lead to a range of behavioural and cognitive impairments. To prevent alcohol-related harm, public health messages advise women to avoid drinking alcohol if they could be pregnant, are pregnant or are trying to get pregnant.

Recent New Zealand research, including initial reports from the Growing Up in New Zealand (GUiNZ) study<sup>1</sup>, shows that most women stopped or substantially reduced their alcohol consumption once they become aware of their pregnancy.

Superu has analysed GUiNZ data to develop a more nuanced understanding of patterns of alcohol consumption during pregnancy. The full analysis of data on alcohol consumption during pregnancy is available in the Technical Report, *"Patterns and dynamics of alcohol consumption during pregnancy in a recent New Zealand cohort of expectant mothers"*<sup>2</sup>.

This Research Summary simplifies the findings contained in the Technical Report and assigns all women, including the group of women who did not drink, into five patterns of alcohol consumption during pregnancy.

In 2010, more than **6,800 expectant mothers** taking part in the GUiNZ study were asked to recall how much alcohol they consumed per week during three time periods.

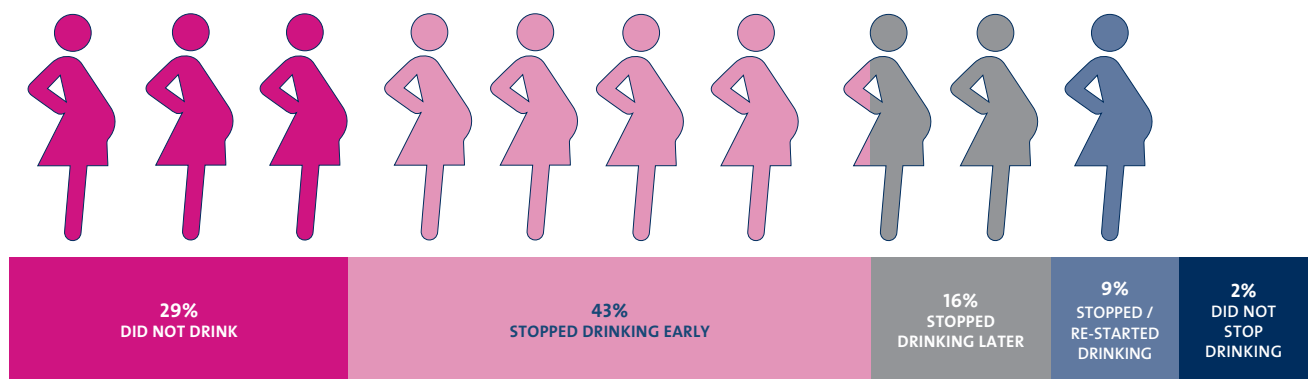


<sup>1</sup> See: <https://cdn.auckland.ac.nz/assets/growingup/research-findings-impact/report01.pdf>  
<sup>2</sup> See: [www.superu.govt.nz/alcoholandpregnancy](http://www.superu.govt.nz/alcoholandpregnancy)

## KEY FINDINGS

Many women reported drinking alcohol before they became aware that they were pregnant. But most stopped drinking or reduced the amount they drank once they became aware of their pregnancy.

Superu’s analysis of GUiNZ data grouped women into one of five patterns of change<sup>3</sup> in alcohol consumption during pregnancy:



### Did not drink



Three in ten (29%) women **did not drink** before and during pregnancy.

### Stopped drinking early



Four in ten (43%) women **stopped drinking early** when they became aware of their pregnancy and completely abstained for the remainder of their pregnancy.

### Stopped drinking later



Fewer than two in ten (16%) women **stopped drinking later**. Most women in this group (92%) only stopped drinking *after* the first trimester, and a few (8%) who had been drinking four or more drinks per week reduced alcohol consumption to less than one drink per week after the first trimester.

### Stopped/re-started drinking



One in ten (9%) women followed a zig-zag pattern of **"stop-start"** drinking during pregnancy. Women in this group either stopped drinking when they became aware of their pregnancy but resumed drinking (most less than one drink per week) after the first trimester, or they drank at lighter levels (most less than one drink per week) once they became aware that they were pregnant.

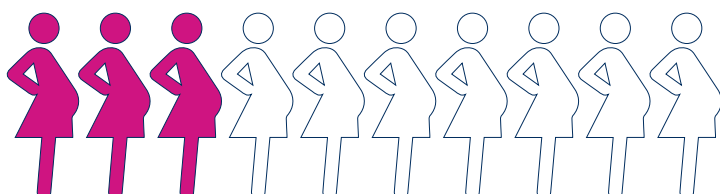
### Did not stop drinking



A very small percentage (2%) of women **did not stop drinking**, consuming at least one drink per week throughout pregnancy.

<sup>3</sup> The Technical Report *Patterns and dynamics of alcohol consumption during pregnancy in a recent New Zealand cohort of expectant mothers* categorises the sample into one of seven main pathways of change in alcohol consumption in pregnancy. Given the similarities across some of the pathways, this Research Summary combines "slow changers" and "very slow changers" into one group – stopped drinking later; and "drifters" and "regressors" into one group – stopped / re-started drinking.

## 3 IN 10 WOMEN DID NOT DRINK



Around **three in ten (29%)** women abstained from alcohol throughout their pregnancy, including the time before they became pregnant or became aware of their pregnancy.

Some women were over-represented in this group:

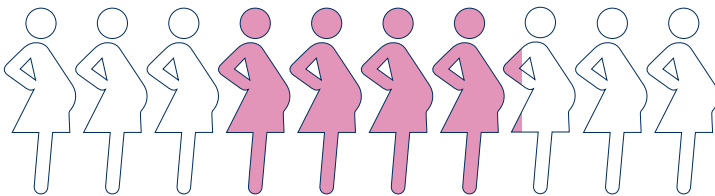
	Pacific	Asian	Household income < \$30,000	Not current smokers
% of women who did not drink	26%	35%	15%	95%
% of all women in the study	15%	15%	10%	89%

Pacific and Asian women were over-represented among those who did not drink alcohol in pregnancy, and so were women with low household income and from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

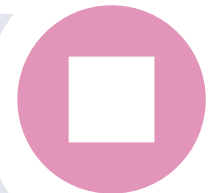
Alcohol may be less affordable for those on lower household incomes, whereas cultural practices and preferences may explain the large differences observed between ethnic groups.

In addition, planning a pregnancy did not necessarily influence drinking behaviour *before* pregnancy. Women who did not drink were less likely to have planned their pregnancy compared with those who did.

## 4 IN 10 WOMEN STOPPED DRINKING EARLY WHEN THEY KNEW THEY WERE PREGNANT



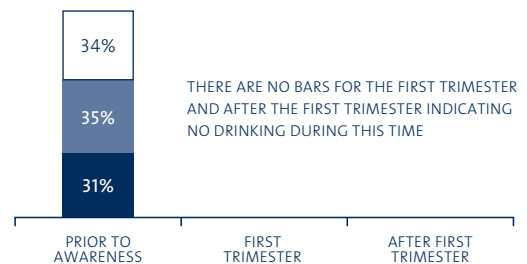
Stopped drinking early



Around **four in ten (43%)** women stopped drinking alcohol once they became aware of their pregnancy and did not drink again during pregnancy.

These women were drinking varying amounts of alcohol before they became aware of their pregnancy. Around one-third had previously consumed four or more drinks per week, one-third one to three drinks, and one-third less than one drink per week. Once they were aware they were pregnant, all women in this group completely abstained from alcohol for the rest of their pregnancy.

### LEVEL OF DRINKING AT DIFFERENT STAGES OF PREGNANCY



Some women were over-represented in this group:

	European	Household income > \$100,000	Planned pregnancy
% of women who stopped drinking early	66%	43%	67%
% of all women in the study	55%	36%	60%

This is the most common pattern of change in alcohol consumption during pregnancy. European women and women from socio-economically advantaged backgrounds were over-represented in this group.

It is likely that social or occasional drinkers accounted for a higher proportion of women in this group. For these women, awareness of their pregnancy appeared to be the trigger for them to stop drinking.

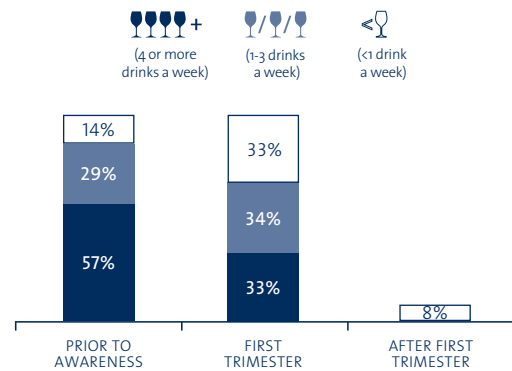
## FEWER THAN 2 IN 10 WOMEN STOPPED DRINKING LATER IN PREGNANCY



Fewer than **two in ten (16%)** women either stopped drinking alcohol *after* the first trimester or continued to drink but at lighter levels.

Although women in this group still consumed alcohol once they became aware of their pregnancy, as a group they reduced their consumption over the course of pregnancy. After the first trimester, most women in this group (92%) completely stopped drinking, and 8% consumed less than one drink per week.

LEVEL OF DRINKING AT DIFFERENT STAGES OF PREGNANCY



Some women were over-represented in this group:

	Age under 20 years	Māori	No secondary school qualification	Current smokers	Unplanned pregnancy
% of women who stopped drinking later	11%	25%	12%	19%	60%
% of all women in the study	5%	14%	7%	11%	40%

Younger women, Māori women, and women from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds were over-represented in this group. Among these women the pattern of risk behaviour was relatively high. The proportions of current smokers and unplanned pregnancies in this group were higher than the sample of all women in the study.

Women in this group seemed to be motivated to stop drinking, but delayed doing so.

## 1 IN 10 WOMEN STOPPED THEN RE-STARTED OR CONTINUED TO DRINK LIGHTLY DURING PREGNANCY



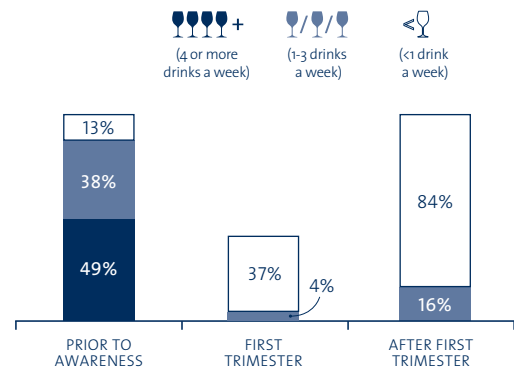
Stopped / re-started drinking



Around **one in ten (9%)** women either stopped drinking when they became aware they were pregnant, but resumed drinking alcohol later in pregnancy or they consumed alcohol throughout pregnancy, but mostly at lighter levels.

Around half (49%) of these women consumed four or more drinks per week before becoming pregnant or becoming aware of their pregnancy. Once they were aware of their pregnancy, 59% stopped drinking alcohol. After the first trimester, however, all women in this group resumed drinking, most (84%) less than one drink per week and some (16%) one to three drinks per week.

### LEVEL OF DRINKING AT DIFFERENT STAGES OF PREGNANCY



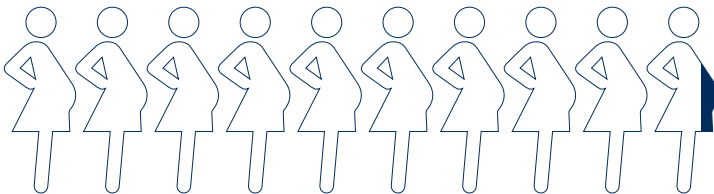
Some women were over-represented in this group:

	Age 35 years or over	European	University qualification	Household income > \$100,000	Planned pregnancy
% of women who stopped then started or drank lightly throughout	38%	84%	55%	58%	76%
% of all women in the study	25%	55%	39%	36%	60%

European women made up the vast majority of this group. Women in this group shared many key characteristics with the group of women who stopped drinking early after they became aware of their pregnancy. But in comparison, the current group was noticeably older, much better qualified and from even more advantaged backgrounds.

These women demonstrated a willingness in the first trimester to substantially cut or stop drinking. But, in reverting back to drinking, these women may have found it difficult to stay away from alcohol or may have believed it was not risky to have an occasional drink later in pregnancy.

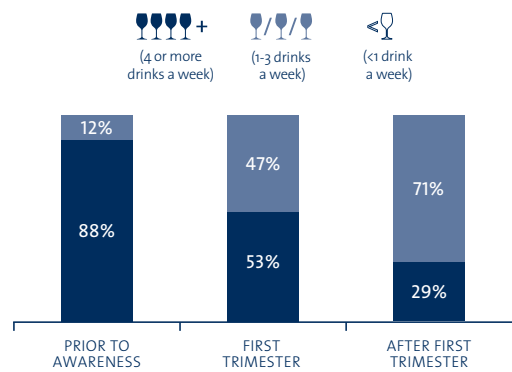
## 2% OF WOMEN DID NOT STOP DRINKING THROUGHOUT PREGNANCY



### A small percentage (2%) of women continued to drink throughout pregnancy.

Most women in this group (88%) consumed four or more drinks per week before pregnancy or before awareness of pregnancy. Although women who showed this pattern reduced their overall drinking during their pregnancy, all consumed at least one drink per week throughout pregnancy.

LEVEL OF DRINKING AT DIFFERENT STAGES OF PREGNANCY



### Some women were over-represented in this group:

	Age 35 years or over	Māori	No secondary school qualification	Household income < \$30,000	Current smokers	Unplanned pregnancy	Have been pregnant before
% of women who did not stop drinking throughout	33%	37%	23%	22%	42%	65%	83%
% of all women in the study	25%	14%	7%	10%	11%	40%	70%

This small group of women had similar characteristics as those who stopped drinking later in pregnancy. However, older women, Māori women and women from disadvantaged backgrounds were even more over-represented in this group. A substantially higher proportion had been pregnant before, and two-thirds of the current pregnancies were unplanned.

Most women in this group were likely to face many different challenges in their daily lives. Compared to all women in the study, women in this group were more than three times as likely to have no secondary qualification, and nearly four times more likely to smoke.

## IN CONCLUSION

*"The analysis reveals the presence of a strong, across-the-board intention to reduce alcohol intake. The challenge for public health is how to help these women translate this good intention into successfully stopping drinking as early as possible during their pregnancy. For each of the different pathways identified in this report, different levels and types of support may be needed and the women may need to be encouraged to stop drinking at different stages of the pregnancy. Women who made changes slowly will need to be incentivised differently from those who made changes quickly. Women who drifted or regressed will need to be supported at the critical times to stop them from reverting back to drinking".*

Patterns and dynamics of alcohol consumption during pregnancy in a recent New Zealand cohort of expectant mothers. Technical Report. August 2015.

## ABOUT GROWING UP IN NEW ZEALAND



SAMPLE OF NEARLY

**7,000**  
CHILDREN

Growing Up in NZ (GUINZ) is a longitudinal study following nearly 7,000 children in New Zealand from before birth to adulthood. The GUINZ study provides a contemporary picture of what it's like to be a child growing up in New Zealand in the 21st century.



### Related Superu Publications:



Technical Report: Patterns and dynamics of alcohol consumption during pregnancy in a recent New Zealand cohort of expectant mothers. August 2015.



At a Glance: How alcohol consumption changes during pregnancy. August 2015.

Download publications at: [www.superu.govt.nz](http://www.superu.govt.nz)



Download the full report: [superu.govt.nz/alcoholandpregnancy](http://superu.govt.nz/alcoholandpregnancy)

For more information contact [enquiries@superu.govt.nz](mailto:enquiries@superu.govt.nz)

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The Families Commission operates under the name Social Policy Evaluation and Research Unit (Superu)