



Alcohol, tobacco, and drug use as reasons for abortion

Sarah CM Roberts, DrPH ■ Danielle Sinkford, BA ■ Lyndsay Ammon Avalos, PhD, MPH ■ Diana Greene Foster, PhD

Background

This study examines 1) how women describe alcohol, tobacco, and/or drug use (ATOD) as reasons for having an abortion and 2) levels of ATOD use and pregnancy intentions among women citing ATOD as reasons.

Recent attention to alcohol and drug use during pregnancy is intertwined with debates about abortion (Golden 2005; Armstrong 2003; Murphy & Rosenbaum 1999). In fact, one of the first publications on fetal alcohol syndrome suggested that “serious consideration be given to early termination of pregnancy in severely chronic alcoholic women” (Jones & Smith 1975).

In the 1980s, official recommendations regarding alcohol use during pregnancy began focusing on abstinence. Some people expressed concern that abstinence recommendations would lead women who had “occasional” or “light” drinking before discovering pregnancy to consider terminating otherwise wanted pregnancies (Lipson & Webster 1990; Koren 1991; Koren, Koren & Gladstone 1996). Such concerns persist (Armstrong & Abel 2000; Lawson 2005; Todorow, Moore & Koren 2010). There is also concern that policies punishing pregnant women for drug use may lead women to have abortions (Roberts 1999; Gomez 1997). Yet there is no evidence from published research that this is the case.

Methods

Data come from baseline interviews of UCSF’s Turnaway Study, which recruited 956 women seeking an abortion at one of 30 U.S. clinics between 2008 and 2010. Baseline interviews were conducted one week after women sought the abortion. Eligible participants were pregnant, 15 years or older, English- or Spanish-speaking, with no known fetal anomalies or demise. Three study groups were identified: women presenting for abortion care just

over a clinic’s gestational limit, just under a clinic’s gestational limit, or under the limit and in their first trimester. The current study combines the three groups for analysis.

Results

Nearly 5% reported ATOD as a reason, 2.6% cited alcohol, <.5% tobacco, and 2.9% drugs. Only .7% cited both alcohol and drugs as reasons; no woman cited tobacco without also citing alcohol or drugs.

Women worried that their ATOD had affected their baby’s health:

- “I was drinking quite a bit. I didn’t want the baby to come out with any problems.” (binged 5x before discovering pregnancy at 13 weeks; sought abortion at 22 weeks)
- “I was worried about fetal alcohol syndrome.” (smoked cigarettes, binged 1x, 2 blackouts, daily marijuana use before discovering pregnancy at 23 weeks; sought abortion at 24 weeks.)
- “I was using drugs and on methadone. I didn’t want to have an unhealthy baby.” (smoked cigarettes, used heroin 4-6x/week before discovering pregnancy at 5 weeks; sought abortion at 22 weeks)

Other women reported concerns that their own or their partner’s ATOD would influence parenting:

- “Being an alcoholic...I didn’t feel it would be the best thing to bring a child into my lifestyle.” (smoked cigarettes, binged daily, 15 blackouts before discovering pregnancy at 8 weeks; sought abortion at 8 weeks)
- “The father...is a drug addict and...I don’t want to have the baby deal with his lifestyle.” (no use reported; discovered pregnancy at 14 weeks; sought abortion at 26 weeks)

Of women reporting alcohol as a reason, 84% had binged or had an alcohol-related problem the month before discovering pregnancy (Table 1). 61% reporting drugs as a reason had used drugs before discovering pregnancy.

Table 1	Alcohol reason ^a (N=25)	Drug reason ^a (N=28)
Non-binge alcohol	16%	25%
Binge/problem alcohol	84%	32%
Binge frequency ^b		
<1x per week	28%	—
1-3x per week	32%	—
>=4x per week	16%	—
Eye opener	4%	—
Blackout	28%	—
Tobacco use	60%	71%
Any drug use	—	61%
Marijuana only	—	18%
Other drugs	—	43%
Drug use frequency c		
<1x per week	—	12%
1-3x per week	—	29%
>=4x per week	—	59%

^aAlcohol as a reason and drug as a reason are not mutually exclusive categories

^b2 who reported bingeing did not report a binge frequency

Women using drugs reported frequent drug use, with 88% using more than 1x/week and 59% using >4x/week.

98% of women reporting ATOD as a reason for abortion had pregnancies that were unintended at the time of conception. For the one woman reporting an intended pregnancy, qualitative data indicate that her partner’s resumption of drug use was the reason for seeking an abortion.

Conclusion

While 1 in 20 women reported ATOD as a reason for abortion, they do not seem to be terminating otherwise wanted pregnancies and tend to drink at levels exceeding a low threshold. Women reporting drugs as a reason did not mention fear of punishment. Data are inconsistent with the ideas that alcohol-abstinence recommendations and punitive policies lead women using low-levels of alcohol or using drugs to terminate otherwise wanted pregnancies.