

FASD NEWSLETTER 2023

SUPPORTING FREE AND INFORMED CHOICES

FA fetal
SD alcohol
spectrum
disorders

talk about it for better action



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Association pour la santé publique du Québec (ASPQ)

The ASPQ is an autonomous association bringing together citizens and partners to make sustainable health a priority. Sustainable health is rooted in a long-term vision that, while providing health care to all, also keeps people healthy through prevention.

Our organization advises, investigates, raises awareness, mobilizes stakeholders and issues recommendations based on evidence, expert consensus, international experience and social acceptability.

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How to support informed choices in order to prevent FASD

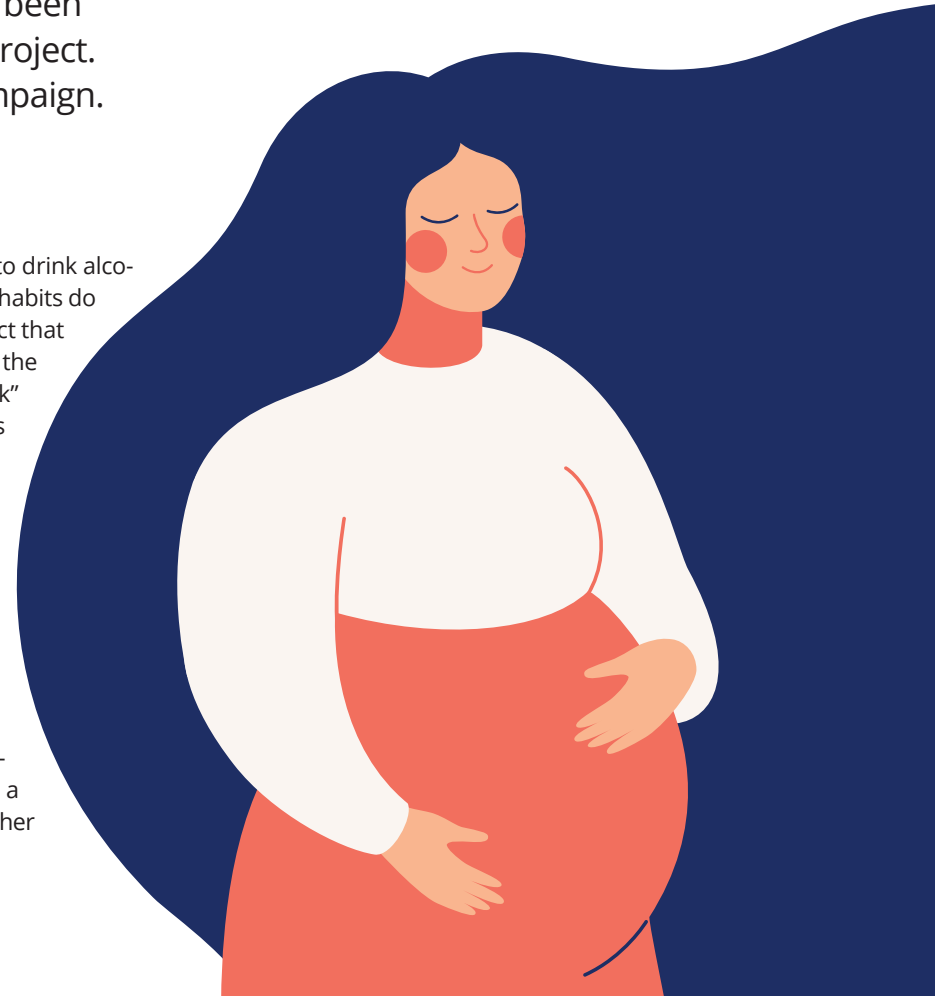
Since 2019, the *Association pour la santé publique du Québec* (ASPQ) has been launching various initiatives as part of its *FASD: More talk, more action* project. Among these was the ***During pregnancy, go alcohol-free*** awareness campaign. You can discover its many tools by visiting our bilingual website at fasd-alcoholfreepregnancy.ca.

While much progress was made over the last four years, many Quebecers still do not know what Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is and how it can be prevented. How are we supposed to make informed decisions regarding alcohol consumption during pregnancy if we do not even know about FASD and its link with prenatal exposure to alcohol?

It is currently impossible to determine the exact number of people who have FASD in Quebec, but there is reason to believe that the prevalence of FASD is higher than the Canadian average, of 4%.^[1,2] Indeed, according to the latest available data, Quebec is undoubtedly the province where the rate of alcohol consumption during pregnancy is the highest.^[3,4] In addition, recent surveys have shown a constant increase in the number of Quebec women who consume alcohol.^[5] In 2017-2018, nearly 80% of Quebec women consumed alcohol, a proportion well on its way to catching up with that of Quebec men (84%).

Of course, the choice of whether or not to drink alcohol is up to the woman, but her drinking habits do not rest solely on her shoulders. It is a fact that alcohol is omnipresent in our lives: from the constant opportunities to “have a drink” to the powerful advertising strategies we are subjected to, the widespread availability of alcoholic products and to the social pressure to conform.^[6] Becoming pregnant doesn’t suddenly make us insensitive to our environment. All these factors play a role in people’s consumption habits.

On this subject, an ASPQ survey carried out by Léger in 2022 revealed that one in seven pregnant women had been offered alcohol during their pregnancy. In a survey conducted by Claudie Mercier on her



Instagram account in May 2023 among 3,483 people, more than six in ten women reported that at least one of their loved ones had encouraged them to consume alcohol during pregnancy (“C’mon, just a little drink, it’s no big deal”). Resisting such pressure is not easy for everyone.

Since several factors can influence alcohol consumption during pregnancy, how can we, collectively as a society and individually as professionals and loved ones, support women to help them make free and informed decisions?

Possible solutions to support freer and more informed choices

In our 2022 Newsletter entitled *Preventing together*, Annie Rivest, general director of SafERA, an organization dedicated to the problem of FASD, underlined that “Raising awareness about the effects of prenatal alcohol exposure and FASD in Quebec remains a major challenge in 2022”. Disseminating information and raising awareness are therefore among the keys to supporting informed choices.

Furthermore, the way we talk about alcohol in the public space also plays a role in generating interest, breaking taboos, and encouraging open and factual discussions on consumption. In this newsletter’s first article, our colleague Maude Dubois Mercier presents proven communication strategies and practices that were gathered among a variety of actors in the field of prevention and harm reduction as part of the *Dialogues Alcool*.

In the next article, with 30% to 60% of pregnancies being unplanned and 80% of women consuming alcohol, Marie-Alexia Masella presents recommended preventive measures that can be put in place to meet the challenge posed by this type of pregnancy.

Although much remains to be done in order to increase the visibility of FASD, two Quebec initiatives will be presented. Last October, the *CIUSSS de la Capitale-Nationale*’s Public Health Department published Quebec’s first intervention tool designed to help health and social services

professionals prevent prenatal alcohol exposure and its consequences. Montreal’s Regional Public Health Director has also relaunched an information newsletter which covers, among other topics, alcohol consumption during pregnancy.

Regulating alcohol marketing is a promising solution to help prevent FASD.^[7] Public policies are essential to create environments that encourage behaviours favourable to FASD prevention. A federal bill recently tabled in the Senate could possibly help in this regard: Bill S-253 respecting a national framework for fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. Our lawyer and head of legal affairs, Marianne Dessureault, summarizes it in this newsletter.

Adding warning messages on alcoholic beverage containers and warning signs at different alcohol points of sale would also be an interesting way to raise awareness about the risks of alcohol consumption.^[8]

Bill S-254 amending the Food and Drugs Act (warning labels on alcoholic beverages) could also support these structuring changes. This subject will be discussed in the article *Warning labels: A promising approach to support pregnant women* by Me Marianne Dessureault.

This captivating newsletter provides a wide array of information to help support pregnant women’s choices regarding alcohol consumption. We all have a role to play to better inform and support Quebecers about alcohol consumption, its effects and risks and to help prevent FASD. Please refer to our past FASD newsletters and other documents on our website for more information. ■

We hope you enjoy this newsletter!

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By **Maude Dubois Mercier**,
Dialogues Alcool et Périnatalité project lead

Five basic principles for talking about alcohol

Even though the impact that alcohol can have on the health of unborn babies are well documented, the subject is still seldom discussed, both in the public and private spheres.

Perhaps as a result of this, in 2020, 64% of adolescents, 50% of Quebecers and 28% of pregnant women were unaware of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD)¹. Awareness campaigns can be effective to inform the population and support informed decision-making, but they can also contribute to stigmatization and create a feeling of shame among pregnant women who use or have used drugs or for people living with FASD. In this context, women may be less inclined to discuss this subject with health professionals, take medical appointments related to their pregnancy or request support to reduce their alcohol consumption.

Another fact to consider: between 30% and 60% of pregnancies in Quebec are unplanned (to find out more, see the article *Alcohol and pregnancy: The particular challenges of unplanned pregnancies* by Marie-Alexia Masella). However, in 2017-2018, 80% of Quebec women aged 12 and over reported consuming alcohol and nearly 50% of them said they did so regularly.² In addition, in 2021, nearly 18% of Quebec women aged 18 to 34 reported having consumed alcohol excessively (4 drinks or more on the same occasion)³ at least once a month in the past year. In light of these facts, prevention efforts should

not be solely targeted at pregnant women, but all women of childbearing age.

One possible solution is to share responsibility with the entire population. All of society must be concerned about

How can we support informed choices regarding alcohol consumption among pregnant women and women of childbearing age without stigmatizing them?

this issue. And considering the fact that alcohol consumption benefits from a favourable social norm in Quebec, a collective reflection would be all the more beneficial for the health and well-being of the entire population.

This is the question that the people participating in the *Dialogues Alcool* project focused on: how can we support free and informed choices regarding alcohol without stigmatizing? More than 35 people from 11 regions of Quebec working in planning, programming, research, and other intervention sectors involved in preventing or reducing alcohol-related harm took part in one of several activities organized as part of the project.



- 1 Association pour la Santé Publique du Québec (2020). « Consommation alcool et grossesse ASPQ. Sondage auprès de femmes enceintes ou ayant récemment accouché, d'adolescent(e)s et de Québécois(e)s ». <https://www.aspq.org/priorite/trouble-du-spectre-de-lalcoolisation-foetale-tsaf/>
- 2 Institut national de santé publique du Québec : INSPQ - Expertise. (2019 [cité 14 juill 2020]). « Portrait de la consommation d'alcool au Québec et au Canada ». <https://www.inspq.qc.ca/substances-psychoactives/alcool/dossier/portrait-de-la-consommation-alcool-au-canada-et-au-quebec>
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While several questions remain unanswered, these discussions led to the creation of a collaborative document: “Five basic principles supporting our collective communication efforts on alcohol.” This is intended to be a working and awareness tool for organizations involved in issues related to alcohol. Here are the highlights.

Convey a clear, transparent and nuanced message

The information transmitted to the public must be simple, scientifically accurate, and nuanced. The possible consequences of alcohol consumption are thus presented in a factual manner, without the intention of convincing. In the case of alcohol and pregnancy, this means stating that alcohol is toxic for the fetus and can therefore lead to malformations in various organs (e.g., heart, brain and kidneys) and FASD.

Focus on the person’s capacity to act and think for themselves (agency)

These messages appeal to people’s thinking, intelligence and engagement while contributing to the development of the public’s capacity for action. The dissemination of inspiring role models, practical solutions to mitigate

risks and decision support or self-assessment tools are some effective examples. Several awareness tools putting this concept into practice are available on the website www.fasd-alcoholfreepregnancy.ca.

Recognize the plurality of realities

The alcohol consuming population is very diverse. By adapting the message to the motivations, characteristics and environment of a particular audience, they are more likely to feel challenged and adopt behaviours more favourable to their health and well-being. For example, expecting a child is a period rife with worries and challenges for parents, which must be considered when developing communications with this audience.

Adopt a caring, egalitarian tone free from value judgment

Such messages demonstrate a positive consideration of the public, with its strengths and challenges, in order to empower people to make their own choices. Conversely, using a directive, imperative and guilt-inducing tone should be avoided. The same goes for the use of statements based on presumptions and undue generalizations, or a lexicon

with moral connotations. As mentioned earlier, this type of communication may discourage a pregnant woman from asking questions or seeking support that would benefit her and her unborn child.

Involve communities

Obstacles and possible solutions to a problem are known by the people who experience them. They are therefore essential actors and must be involved in the development of messages that are meaningful to them. Showing openness and listening is also a protective factor against mistakes which can hurt or break a bond of trust. Involving the pregnant woman, as well as her partner and those close to her, in the search for possible solutions will help increase the impact of communications on alcohol.

These concrete ideas can contribute to the effectiveness alcohol messaging and efforts to raise awareness about the effects of alcohol during pregnancy for the entire population. By increasing knowledge, the social pressure on pregnant women to consume should be relieved. It is often said that it takes a village to raise a child, but this saying is just as applicable to pregnancies. ■



Marie-Alexia Masella, M.A., doctoral student in bioethics at the University of Montreal's École de santé publique

Alcohol and pregnancy:

The particular challenges of unplanned pregnancies

The prevention of FASD and alcohol consumption during pregnancy is essential. Scientific research is clear: alcohol consumption during pregnancy can lead to malformations, through its action on the development of the embryo and fetus^[1-8]. Although several prevention campaigns have been developed, certain challenges remain in their creation, adaptation and implementation, particularly for one population: women experiencing an unplanned pregnancy.

Unplanned pregnancies

An unplanned pregnancy may refer to different situations^[9-12]:

- **Unwanted pregnancy:** a pregnancy that occurs at a time when the person did not want (or no longer wanted) a child.
- **Poorly planned pregnancy:** a pregnancy that occurs earlier or later than desired.

Conversely, a pregnancy is said to be planned when a couple makes the decision to have sexual relations in order to achieve a pregnancy as quickly as possible and successfully does so at the "right time"^[13-14].

Unplanned pregnancies are more common than one might think. Worldwide, the rate of unplanned pregnancies ranges between 30 and 60%^[5,8,9,15-24]. In Canada, these numbers are roughly the same^[24-27].

Women that are socio-economically disadvantaged (low education, low income), racialized, exposed to psychological, physical and sexual violence, experiencing a mental health disorder (depression, anxiety) or a disorder linked to substance use are more likely to experience an unplanned pregnancy^[6,9,12,13,23,27-32].

While there is no clear consensus in the literature, some studies associate unplanned pregnancies with higher risks of exposure to alcohol than planned pregnancies^[10,27,29,33-35]. Different explanations can be given to explain these results^[6,31,33,35,36]:

- Later discovery of the pregnancy;
- Not being able to benefit from advice and support from health professionals since prenatal follow-up did not start early;
- Less likely to engage in safe behaviours or have little knowledge about recommended behaviours to adopt during pregnancy;
- Non-cessation of alcohol consumption by women who wish to become pregnant.

Also, the occurrence of an unplanned pregnancy can cause different reactions in women. Thus, some continue their consumption after discovering their pregnancy^[37], or even increase it, because they do not know exactly how to react^[37-38] or have attachment issues towards the unborn child^[37].

According to the available literature, the majority of pregnant women, whether the pregnancy is planned or not, reduce or stop their consumption when they have confirmation of their pregnancy^[35-39].



Challenges in preventing prenatal alcohol exposure during unplanned pregnancies

To effectively prevent prenatal alcohol exposure in the context of an unplanned pregnancy, it is important to note the challenges people may face:

- **Delay before noticing pregnancy.** For women whose pregnancy was not planned or expected, there may be a longer delay between conception and knowing they are pregnant, which may increase the period of prenatal alcohol exposure [8,12,17].
- **Delay before starting medical follow-up.** Following the late discovery of their pregnancy or the ambivalence felt about it, there may be a delay in accessing information on alcohol consumption, generally transmitted by health providers at the start of the pregnancy [5,6,11,12,17,29,40].
- **Feeling of anxiety.** The recognition delay can cause anxiety and guilt in women who become aware of the potential consequences of their alcohol consumption [41].
- **Reactions from healthcare providers.** It can be tricky for professionals to approach this subject for two main reasons:
 - The way of presenting the recommendations so as not to create too much worry and anxiety in the pregnant person regarding alcohol consumption which may have already taken place at the start of pregnancy [42];
 - The knowledge and familiarity that each professional has on this subject and on how to approach it. For example, some people are embarrassed to discuss this subject with pregnant people for fear of stigmatizing them [6,17,43].

Recommendations

In addition to the recommendations available for the ethical prevention of alcohol consumption during pregnancy (for more details, consult the first FASD Newsletter), other recommendations specific to unplanned pregnancies can also apply.

First of all, different prevention models may be of interest to inspire practices in the field.

A. The *Four-Part Model of FASD Prevention, developed in Canada, aims to reduce the prevalence of FASD.*

It takes into consideration the contexts that women experiencing an unplanned pregnancy are more likely to experience. Interventions^[43,44] are divided into four levels of prevention:

- **Level 1:** Information related to alcohol consumption habits and promotion of healthy habits within the general population, particularly regarding pregnancy, by focusing on interventions in the community and warnings on alcoholic beverage containers.

- **Level 2:** Prevention of FASD among women of childbearing age and those around them, via brief interventions carried out by health professionals or social services before conception or during pregnancy^[43].
- **Level 3:** Support for women with an alcohol use disorder or a history of violence and sexual assault before conception, during pregnancy and postnatally^[43-44].
- **Level 4:** Support in the postnatal period so that women maintain the new behaviours adopted during pregnancy^[43,44].

B. *The Changing High-risk alcohol use and Increasing Contraception Effectiveness Study (CHOICE Project),*

developed in 2007 in the United States, is aimed at women who are not pregnant, but who could become pregnant, and who consume an excessive amount of alcohol. It aims to reduce or cease alcohol consumption and prevent the occurrence of unplanned pregnancies, including providing the opportunity to discuss contraceptive options. The program uses the motivational interview approach to generate engagement towards a change in behaviour based on objectives and personalized action plans determined with women. This program has demonstrated its effectiveness on numerous occasions and is increasingly used.

C. *The Reproductive life plan, developed in the 1980s, proposes a series of questions on women's health and their desire to have children.*

It promotes the empowermentⁱ of women in terms of reproductive choices and helps support their preferences in terms of fertility by offering an approach centred on their feelings, needs, choices, and desires

ⁱ Empowerment is a process that allows an individual to make choices, apply them and evaluate them in a manner consistent with their values, interests and any other personal factor that they consider relevant.

While being especially careful not to stigmatize, it is also necessary to identify the populations most at risk of unplanned pregnancies and prenatal exposure. Thus, it is possible to deploy appropriate support, in particular through adequate access to contraception and by taking into account the context in which the women live (poverty, racism, gender equality, etc.)ⁱⁱ [13,18].

Finally, it is essential to mention that more studies are needed on pregnancy planning and alcohol consumption. Currently, few studies, including in Canada, are interested in this subject. More research and interventions must be implemented in Canada and Quebec in order to adequately prevent the risks of alcohol consumption among pregnant people, through the development and implementation of adapted and relevant practices and recommendations, in both the preconception and prenatal stages.

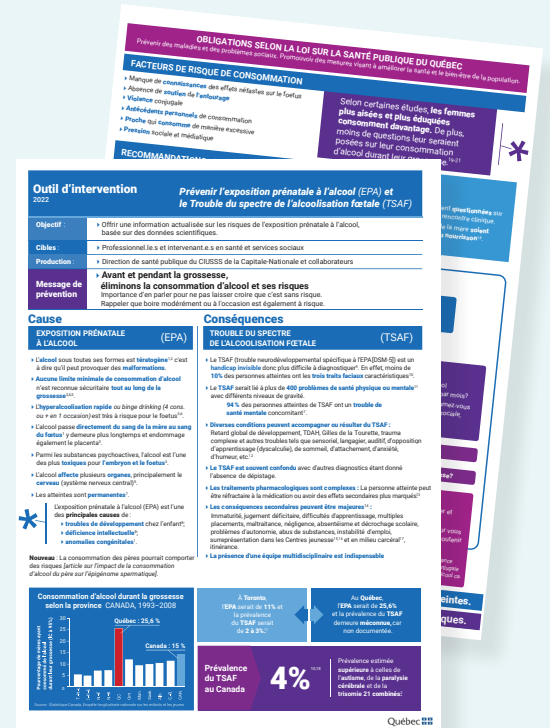
Preventing alcohol consumption among pregnant people with unplanned pregnancies is an important challenge that requires further attention. With approximately one in two pregnancies being unplanned and alcohol consumption being ubiquitous in our industrialized societies, ethical and adapted interventions must be developed and implemented to prevent prenatal exposure to alcohol. Front-line health professionals have an essential role to play with pregnant women in preventing alcohol-related harm and promoting healthy behaviours. We must continue our efforts in terms of research, studies and development of tools and recommendations to help professionals in their daily practice, which is what the **ASPQ**, **CanFASD**, and many other organizations are currently doing. ■

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ii It is important for health professionals to know the factors that can lead women in general and pregnant women in particular to consume alcohol. CanFASD has published an **annotated bibliography of articles on FASD prevention (2022)**. This document presents the different factors that were studied and listed.

Quebec initiatives to prevent FASD

The *Prévenir l'exposition prénatale à l'alcool (EPA) et le Trouble du spectre de l'alcoolisation foetale (TSAF)* intervention tool helps inform professional health and social services teams and engage conversations with women before and during their pregnancy. This document is the result of a close collaboration between the Public Health Department of the *CIUSSS de la Capitale-Nationale*, the ASPQ and SafEra.



SIPPE is a pan-Quebec program that supports families in vulnerable situations from pregnancy to the child's entry into school. The Montreal Regional Public Health Director (DRSP) has relaunched the *Comment SIPPE'rendre* information newsletter for Montreal teams. The August 2023 edition covers alcohol during pregnancy, how to approach the subject and references to consult if necessary. ■

Advertisements targeting women: Cleaning up the public space to foster informed choices

Eager to expand their market, alcohol-based industries are increasingly targeting women, who, until recently, were statistically known to consume less than their male counterparts. Various marketing strategies adapted to this new audience have been put in place. Indeed, since the 1990s, the industry has adapted its strategies to reach more women, including the development of new products based on their preferences, the use of new media reflecting their lifestyle, gender stereotypes and, more recently, the dissemination of messages related to female empowerment or gender equality^[1].

In a context where advertising increasingly targets women and an increasing proportion of Quebec women choose to maintain their alcohol consumption during pregnancy, solutions to reduce advertising exposure and thus ensure truly free and informed choices by consumers must be offered. Prohibiting and better regulating advertisements in public spaces is one of these promising solutions.

Advertising: An influential factor?

Whether people are aware of it or not, advertising is very effective in increasing sales of products and services in the alcoholic beverage industry: just look at the millions of dollars invested in alcohol marketing each year. According to a Léger survey conducted on behalf of the ASPQ in June 2021, 84% of Quebec adults, both men and women, still claim that alcohol advertising does not influence them to drink.

That being said, among those saying they are influenced, 18-34-year-olds are the most likely to recognize it, followed by parents of children under 18.

However, several studies confirm that advertising increases alcohol consumption and certain groups are more sensitive to its effects and consequences, including children, adolescents, young adults, people struggling with addiction, and pregnant women. Exposure to alcohol marketing, including sponsorships and promotional items, influences the perception of alcohol consumption, as well as consumption habits and levels^[2-9].

Benefits from restrictions on advertising in public spaces?

Policies aimed at reducing this exposure by regulating advertising practices are known to be among the most cost-effective measures to counter their harmful effects^[10-12]. In May 2022, following its 75th World Health Assembly, the World Health Organization (WHO) reiterated its goal of making alcohol harm reduction a public health priority. To achieve this, and as recommended in its Global Strategy to Reduce the Harmful Use of Alcohol and Global Alcohol Action Plan 2022-2030, the WHO is focusing on alcohol marketing restrictions to reduce exposure to advertising and promotion^[13-14].

Restrictions, or even a ban, on alcohol advertising in public spaces therefore appear to be promising initiatives to reduce

exposure and harms related to alcohol consumption. This is why several jurisdictions, both in Canada and elsewhere in the world, have adopted regulations limiting advertising in public spaces, such as prohibiting it on public transport, on the side of the road, near schools or even outside shops.

In Quebec, there are no restrictions on the display or advertising of alcohol specifically in outdoor public spaces. *The Regulation respecting advertising, promotion and educational programs relating to alcoholic beverages*^[15] nevertheless regulates, to a certain extent, the distribution and content of advertising and promotional messages from liquor license holders (e.g., bars, restaurants, grocery stores, hotels, and manufacturers), without banning it outright in any specific space. It would be interesting to draw inspiration from other models in order to improve our policies to encourage the creation of environments favourable to the adoption of healthy lifestyle habits and free from the undue and unsolicited pressures created by advertisements in the public space.

On this subject, it is also possible to consult and view, on the ASPQ's web page, a [webinar on reducing advertising exposure in public spaces](#) as well as the collection of [Promising policies to reduce alcohol-related harm](#).



The ASPQ will also be publishing a case study on advertising regulations in public spaces towards the end of September 2023.

Finally, alcohol advertising and subsequent exposure play important roles in constructing the social norm favourable to alcohol consumption. Reducing exposure to alcohol advertising would help change the social norm surrounding alcohol consumption, and conversely promote the acceptability of non-consumption, particularly during pregnancy. This cultural norm of alcohol consumption is also a factor recognized as slowing down the cessation or reduction of alcohol consumption among pregnant women^[17].

Living in a society where alcohol advertising is limited could help support consumers and those around them by reducing temptations and the desire to consume. ■

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The **Senate** takes an interest in FASD

By **Me Marianne Dessureault**, head of legal affairs and project lead, ASPQ

A bill addressing fetal alcohol spectrum disorder has been introduced in the Senate. This is definitely a bill to keep an eye on, as it could contribute to more prevention initiatives and support for those affected. Already, its tabling and the discussion surrounding it are helping to make elected officials aware of this avoidable disorder and to make it better known.

The importance it places on prevention is certainly welcome. Let's keep an eye on the legislative progress!

To learn more about Bill S-253 respecting a national framework on fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD)

In Canada, 4% of the population is affected by FASD, making it the leading cause of neurodevelopmental disability in the country. Appropriate supportive measures to reduce the number of alcohol-exposed pregnancies should be considered. To do this, the Senate is studying a legislative request to create a national framework to support Canadians with FASD, their families and caregivers.

Introduced and tabled by the Honourable Mohamed-Iqbal Ravalia, Independent Senator from Newfoundland and Labrador, on October 19, 2022, the **bill** is still under review in the Senate. Following its second reading on June 1, 2023, the bill was referred to the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology for further study. Once the bill is approved in the Senate, it will have to be studied by the House of Commons. These steps can take several months.

In brief, the bill proposes the following:

- Measures to meet the training and orientation needs of professionals for the prevention and diagnosis of FASD and to support the people affected;
- Measures to promote research, communication and information sharing between governments on prevention, diagnosis and support measures;
- National standards on the prevention and diagnosis of FASD and support for those affected;
- A strategy to raise awareness of the risks associated with alcohol consumption during pregnancy and FASD, in particular by recommending changes to the legislative and strategic frameworks concerning the consumption and marketing of alcohol;
- Any other measure that the Minister considers useful to prevent FASD, ensure that people who suffer from it receive the correct diagnosis, and improve their conditions and quality of life, but also those of their families and their caregivers.

By **Me Marianne Dessureault**, head of legal affairs and project lead, ASPQ

Warning labels:

A promising approach to support pregnant women

At the end of 2022, a bill was presented by the Honourable Patrick Brazeau, independent senator from Quebec, to amend the *Food and Drugs Act* to add an obligation to affix warning labels to alcoholic beverages on the risk of drinking alcohol during pregnancy (see the box below for more information)^[1]. The adoption of such a policy is a promising solution to be explored in order to improve public awareness about the impacts of alcohol consumption^[2].

Impacts and acceptability of such measures

In Canada, certain concepts related to alcohol consumption, such as what constitutes a standard drink and the impacts of alcohol on well-being, seems insufficiently or little known. Indeed, according to a Léger survey conducted on behalf of the ASPQ in 2020, in Quebec, at least two people in five consider that it is safe for the health of the fetus for the mother to consume one drink of alcohol per month, and a quarter consider it safe to have one drink per week. In addition, half of respondents said they were unaware of fetal alcohol syndrome disorder (FASD)^[3].

Interestingly, populations that are more sensitive to the effects of alcohol and marketing strategies, such as young people, those who consume excessively and pregnant women, also seem to be the most receptive to warning messages.

It has also been reported that warning labels about alcohol consumption during pregnancy promote dialogue between pregnant women who drink and their health care providers. The measure also seems to encourage the maintenance of non-consumption among those who drink little or nothing during their pregnancy^[4]. It is also estimated that the costs of implementing such a measure would be minimal or very low^[5].

This policy is also broadly supported by the Quebec population: 77% of Quebec adults, surveyed in June 2021 by Léger on behalf of the ASPQ, agree with the obligation to include prevention messages on the dangers of alcohol consumption during pregnancy on alcoholic beverage containers. Additionally, 80% also agreed that such messages should be broadcast at alcohol outlets.

Initiatives in Canada

In Canada, despite popular support, optimized warning labels on alcohol containers are non-existent in 11 of the 13 provinces and territories. In the only two territories where they are applied, "They do not follow recommended practices and are applied in accordance with in-store policy, not by a requirement on the manufacturer imposed by law"^[6].

For example, in the Yukon, stickers relating to alcohol consumption during pregnancy have been affixed to containers since the mid-1990s: *Warning: drinking alcohol during pregnancy can cause birth defects*. A pilot project funded by the Government of Canada in 2017 aimed to create a large, mandatory coloured label containing warnings in the form of pictograms and messages related to FASD, the number of standard glasses and cancer. The warning against alcohol-related cancer risks, however, was dropped following strong pressure from the alcohol industry^[7-9].

In Ontario, prevention messages related to alcohol during pregnancy are displayed inside points of sale. Coming into force on February 1, 2005, Sandy's Law requires all Ontario establishments serving or selling alcohol, including the LCBO (Crown Corporation) and grocery stores authorized to sell alcohol, to display, according to certain prescribed visual criteria, prevention and warning messages related to alcohol and pregnancy. Failure to comply with this provision constitutes an offence under the Liquor License Act and can be punishable, as an administrative sanction, by a fine. To learn more about this Ontario legislative model, you can consult the ASPQ [case study](#) on the subject.

As for Quebec, it is only on a voluntary basis that certain manufacturers affix warnings to the containers of their products in the form of text or pictograms. According to federal standards, certain information must nevertheless be included on the labels and packaging of alcoholic beverages, such as alcohol content, allergens and ingredients. Certain claims that can be made on these products are also subject to restrictions. However, no messages related to health or the risks of alcohol are imposed^[10].

Bill S-254

An Act to amend the Food and Drugs Act (warning label on alcoholic beverages)

Presented and tabled on November 2, 2022, by the Honourable Patrick Brazeau, independent senator from Quebec (Repentigny), the **bill** is still being examined by the Senate. The second reading, completed on June 1, 2023, allowed the bill to be transferred to the Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology. It is expected that work will continue during the year in the hope that the bill can be studied by the House of Commons soon.

The preamble to the legislative text recognizes that there is a direct causal link between alcohol consumption and the development of fatal cancers. However, many Canadians are unaware of the negative impacts that alcohol consumption can have on health and that it can increase the risk of cancer. Based on the objective that it is essential for the public to have access to accurate and up-to-date health information to make informed decisions regarding alcohol consumption, adding a warning label on alcoholic beverages would be an effective way of making consumers aware of this health information.

It is therefore requested that the Food and Drugs Act be amended to add, after section 5, the following:

“5.1 No person shall sell a beverage that contains 1.1 per cent or more alcohol by volume unless the package in which it is sold bears, in the prescribed form and manner, a label warning against the risks of alcohol consumption to the health of consumers and showing, in addition to any other prescribed information,

- the volume of beverage that, in the opinion of the Department, constitutes a standard drink;
- the number of standard drinks in the package;
- the number of standard drinks that, in the opinion of the Department, should not be exceeded in order to avoid significant health risks; and
- a message from the Department that sets out the direct causal link between alcohol consumption and the development of fatal cancers.”

Initiatives elsewhere in the world

Several countries^[11] require that messages on health risks, risks during pregnancy or those when driving a car related to alcohol be affixed to all containers or certain types of alcohol, including Ireland^[12], South Korea^[13] and the United States^[14]. The European Parliament is also studying the issue.

Here is an example of a warning label in the United States (California):

GOVERNMENT WARNING: (1) According to the Surgeon General, women should not drink alcoholic beverages during pregnancy because of the risk of birth defects. (2) Consumption of alcoholic beverages impairs your ability to drive a car or operate machinery, and may cause health problems.

In this respect, Ireland is an example to follow. It recently adopted and implemented a public health law aimed at reducing alcohol consumption at the population level. Several measures are included in this law, including a mandatory warning on alcoholic beverage containers. Despite opposition from industry, the country moved forward, and the European Commission authorized the introduction of uniform warnings on alcohol products sold in Ireland^[16]. The debate is to be continued since the World Trade Organization (WTO) will also have to look into the matter^[17,18].

To learn more about Ireland's recent legislative adoption and its impact, consult the case study on the ASPQ website!

Finally, to be optimal, the warnings must also be clear, visible, simple and the message prominent^[19]. On the other hand, in order to ensure its effectiveness, the addition of warnings must also be considered within a more global strategy for adopting other public policies with a similar objective of reducing alcohol-related harm. Such a policy must therefore be accompanied by other measures aimed at reducing the harm linked to alcohol consumption. As part of a global strategy aimed at establishing environments favourable to healthy lifestyle habits and the reduction of harms linked to alcohol and the prevention of FASD, the obligation to display warnings on the various risks of alcohol on alcoholic beverage containers and in stores should be considered. This strategy could help make informed decisions when it comes to consuming alcohol and support parents and those around them before, during and after pregnancy. ■

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FA fetal
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spectrum
disorders

talk about it for better action