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Background

- There are over 295,000 births in Australia each year (ABS, 2010).
- More than half of all pregnant women report some alcohol or other drug use in pregnancy, representing a major public health issue.
- Problematic use of alcohol by women and partners in pregnancy has been linked to poorer relationship quality and domestic violence (Bakhireva, 2011 and Hedin, 2000), however it is unclear whether lower threshold alcohol use (e.g. low/moderate use) is also related to relationship quality and abuse.
- Parents drinking at low/moderate levels, and at harmful but non-diagnostic levels represent the majority of the population but are the least studied groups.
- Surveys of women attending general practice in Australia reveal varying rates of partner abuse from 8.0% to 28% over a 12-month period (Hegarty & Roberts, 2008).
- Clinical studies in emergency departments and antenatal clinics in Australia indicate that between 19.3% and 25.0% of women will be subjected to domestic violence over their lifetime. (Hegarty & Roberts, 2008).
- Around 4-8% of women report experiencing domestic violence during pregnancy. Drug dependency, including alcohol use in mothers and partners, has been correlated with physical and sexual abuse (Hedin, 2000).
- Improved understanding of the relationship of alcohol use among pregnant women and partners (particularly lower threshold use which is most common), with couple relationship quality and spousal abuse, will direct public health interventions targeting alcohol use and relationship functioning in pregnancy.

Aim

- To describe the demographic and psychosocial characteristics of a pilot cohort of pregnant women and partners recruited through low-risk antenatal clinics.
- To monitor the quantity and frequency of alcohol use in the cohort during pregnancy.
- To investigate the association between maternal and partner alcohol use and scores on relationship satisfaction, cohesion and consensus.
- To investigate the association of maternal and partner alcohol use with physical and non-physical spousal abuse.

Method

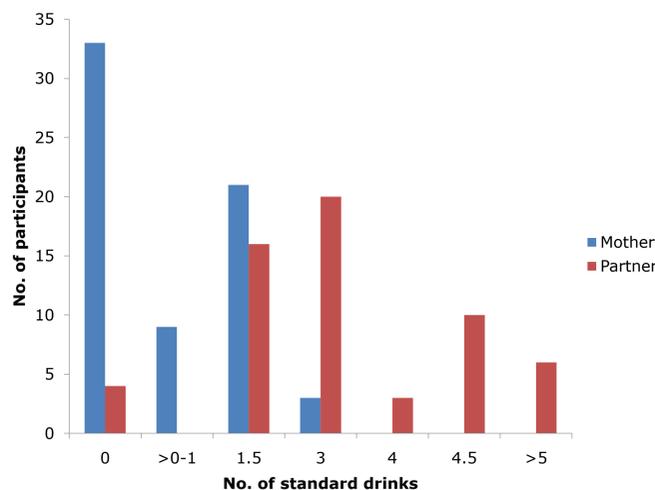
- 68 pregnant women and their partners were recruited through low-risk antenatal clinics at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital.
- Assessment involved interview and self-complete questionnaires.
- Past month alcohol use was assessed antenatally.
- Relationship quality (degree of consensus, satisfaction and cohesion) was measured using the Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS).
- Physical and non-physical spousal abuse were measured using the Index of Spouse Abuse (ISA).

Results

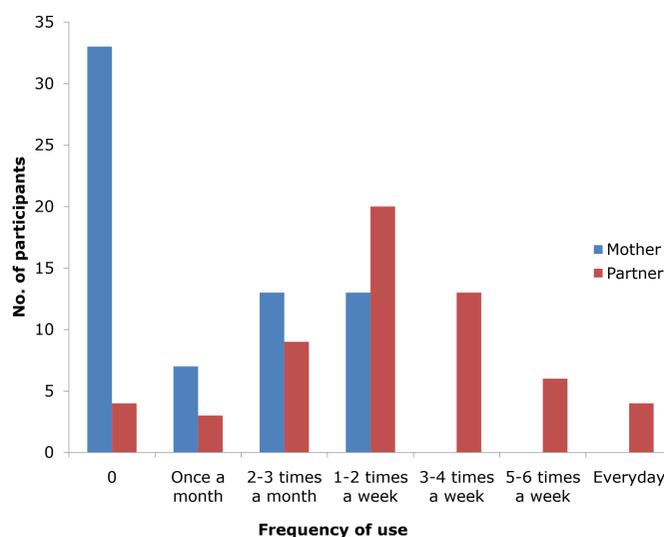
Sample demographic and psychosocial characteristics

Characteristics	Mother	Partner
Mean Age (years)	33.04	36.33
Born in Australia (%)	65	66
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (%)	1	2
Median Schooling Years	12	12
Completed Tertiary Education	90	90
Employed Full-Time (%)	62	85
Mean Fortnightly Income (after tax) (AUD)	\$1,622	\$2,169
Married (%)	61	67
Living in Own House/Unit (%)	52	57

Quantity of past month alcohol use during pregnancy (in standard drinks)



Frequency of past month alcohol use during pregnancy



Relationship between past month alcohol use and scores on the ISA and RDA for mothers and partners

	Mother		Partner	
	Quantity	Frequency	Quantity	Frequency
ISA Physical Abuse	-.178	-.176	.219	.053
ISA Non-Physical Abuse	-.230	-.207	.237	.102
ISA Total	-.201	-.189	.176	-.012
RDAS Consensus	-.017	-.038	-.115	-.234
RDAS Satisfaction	.095	.048	-.392 .003**	.066
RDAS Cohesion	-.275 .028**	-.210	-.152	.095
RDAS Total	.080	-.085	-.205	-.179

**p is significant at 0.05 level

Clinical cut offs for scores on the ISA and RDAS

	Mother		Partner	
	= or > Cut off	< Cut-off	= or > Cut off	< Cut-off
ISA Physical	5%	95%	0%	100%
ISA Non-Physical	3%	97%	24%	86%
RDAS Consensus	86.6%	13.4%	47.5%	54.2%
RDAS Satisfaction	88%	11.9%	90%	10%
RDAS Cohesion	70.6%	29.4%	83.3%	16.7%
RDAS Total	74.6%	25.4%	46.7%	53.3%

*ISA Scoring: Higher scores = lower levels of spouse abuse.
*RDAS Scoring: Lower scores = greater relationship distress.

Discussion

- During pregnancy, women drank alcohol less frequently and in lower quantity than their partners.
- No relationship between alcohol use and spouse abuse (physical or non-physical) was identified for women or their partners.
- However, on the ISA subscales, 3-5% of mothers scored above the clinical cut off, reporting some form of physical and non-physical abuse. No partners scored above the cut off for physical abuse, however 24% scored above the cut off for non-physical abuse.
- Scores on the RDAS indicate that for mothers, higher quantity of alcohol use was associated with lower reported relationship cohesion. Among partners, higher quantity of alcohol use was associated with lower reported relationship satisfaction.
- For the RDAS subscales, a large percentage of mothers scored above the clinical cut-offs, meaning most mothers in the sample reported their relationship quality as non-distressed. However, over half of the partner sample were in the distressed category for relationship quality and consensus.

Conclusion

- This study examined a pilot cohort of pregnant women and partners recruited through low-risk antenatal clinics. Consistent with past research, pregnant women typically drank alcohol less frequently and in lower quantity than their partners.
- Maternal alcohol use was related to poorer relationship cohesion, and partner alcohol use was related to poorer relationship satisfaction. However, drinking was not related to either physical or non-physical spousal abuse in women or their partners.
- Notably, 24% of partners reported non-physical abuse in their relationship, and more than half reported elevated relationship distress. Pregnancy is a time of increased relationship pressure for partners.
- This study was limited by the small sample under investigation. Extension of the pilot to a larger sample would lead to improved knowledge of the effects of lower threshold alcohol use on couples in pregnancy.

Acknowledgements & Contact

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