

# The Impact of Oxidative Stress on Pregnancy. The Neglected Role of Alcohol Misuse

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## Abstract

Oxygen is essential for human life. However, it could cause damaging effects on biological systems causing oxidative stress. Oxidative stress defined as “an alteration in the pro-oxidant–antioxidant balance in favor of the former that leads to potential damage” is characterized by the release of Reactive Oxygen Species (ROS). Oxidative stress is now recognized to play a central role in the pathophysiology of many different disorders, including complications of pregnancy such as placental pathology, PreEclampsia (PE), Intrauterine Growth Restriction (IUGR), gestational diabetes, and miscarriage. This narrative review aims to summarize pieces of evidence about the role of oxidative stress in the pathophysiology of the main obstetric complications with particular interest in the neglected role of alcohol abuse. *Clin Ter* 2024; 175 (1):47-56 doi: 10.7417/CT.2024.5033

**Keywords:** oxidative stress, pregnancy, placenta, preeclampsia, IUGR, gestational diabetes, miscarriage

## Introduction

Oxygen is a vital element for living beings and it has both positive benefits and potentially damaging effects on biological systems (1). Oxygen participates in high-energy electron transfers and contributes to the synthesis of Adenosine-5-TriPhosphate (ATP) (2,3). This is vital for complex multicellular beings, but also it is liable to attack any biological molecule as proteins, lipids, or nucleic acids. Although the human body is under constant oxidative attack from Reactive Oxygen Species (ROS) (4), a complex mechanism of antioxidant defenses has evolved to hold this attack in balance. However, sometimes this equilibrium could be perturbed, leading to oxidative stress. Oxidative stress is best defined as an alteration in the pro-oxidant–antioxidant balance in favor of the production of oxidizing species that leads to potential damage (5).

The prooxidant-antioxidant balance could be disrupted by changes in either side of equilibrium (abnormally high

generation of ROS or deficiencies in the antioxidant defenses). The cellular outcome depends on the concentration of ROS causing a wide range of effects from homeostatic adaptations to irreversible damage and cell death. Degradation of pathogens, regulation of cardiac and vascular activities, regulation of intracellular calcium concentration, and phosphorylation or dephosphorylation of proteins are among the functions performed by ROS (6).

Oxygen Species ROS are often called “Free radicals” and are defined as species containing one or more unpaired electrons that confer their high reactivity. In biological systems, free radicals are usually generated from elements involving oxygen and nitrogen. The most important free radical is superoxide anion (7).

Oxidative stress is now recognized to play a central role in the pathophysiology of many different disorders, including complications of pregnancy (8–10).

It has been proved that oxidative stress plays a role in alcohol-induced damage (11)(12–14) and its effects can be mitigated by resveratrol in mice (13) and olive oil in the Mediterranean diet (15,16). In human adults, ethanol is oxidized to acetaldehyde using NAD<sup>+</sup>, mainly by the hepatic enzyme Alcohol Dehydrogenase (ADH) (13). Acetaldehyde is a highly unstable compound and it quickly forms highly toxic free radicals (17–19).

It has been shown that many pediatric syndromes are associated with oxidative stress like Williams syndrome, Down syndrome, Marfan syndrome, Gaucher syndrome, ataxia–telangiectasia, autistic spectrum disorders, Fanconi's anemia, primitive immunodeficiencies and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) or Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) (6,20). FASD or FAS are “spectrum” (21) of pathological conditions shown both in human and animal models caused by alcohol drinking during pregnancy (22–25). Alcohol is a legal and socially acceptable substance of abuse, but it is also very harmful because of its impact on physical, mental, family and social health (11,14,26–32). Alcohol is also a teratogenic substance capable of causing malformations when pregnant women drink during pregnancy by

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damaging embryonic neural crest cells (33–36). This can result in the birth of a baby with severe birth defects, including a wide range of deformities and disabilities identified as FASD spectrum.

Acute and chronic alcohol use has been shown to increase the production of ROS, lower cellular antioxidant levels, and enhance oxidative stress in many tissues (37,38). In chronic alcoholics, prolonged exposure of kidneys and liver to these compounds can lead to severe damage. Acetaldehyde is transformed into ALDH2 (Aldehyde dehydrogenase 2 family) and finally into acetyl-CoA. Once acetyl-CoA is formed it enters the normal citric acid cycle (17) and disrupts the metabolism of the Krebs cycle. These alterations can shift metabolism towards lipid metabolism, leading to the synthesis of triglycerides in the liver, causing liver steatosis (39).

This narrative review aims to summarize evidence about the role of oxidative stress in the pathophysiology of the main obstetric complications like placental pathology, Pre-Eclampsia (PE), Intrauterine Growth Restriction (IUGR), gestational diabetes, and miscarriage with particular interest in the neglected role of alcohol abuse.

## Methods

Studies examined in this narrative review were obtained by searching MEDLINE (last visited May 2022) with keywords “oxidative stress”, “alcohol”, “pregnancy”, “gestation”, “placenta”, “placentation”, “preeclampsia”, “IUGR”, “gestational diabetes”, and “miscarriage”. After filtering for species (human) a total of 1559 papers were found. Filtering for titles, the number of works finally included was 57. Other publications included in the review were retrieved through a manual search of the bibliography.

## Results

### *Placental pathology*

The placenta is a discoidal organ whose main duty is to mediate the exchange of oxygen and nutrients between mother and baby during pregnancy. This exchange takes place between the placental villi and intervillous space (40). The process of the formation of the placenta is called placentation. It occurs when the blastocyst implants properly in the myometrium, and the invasion of extravillous trophoblasts into the maternal decidua and spiral arteries results in the modeling of spiral arteries and lowering circulation resistance in the intervillous space (41). When placentation is disrupted, it may result in diminishing of placental function, causing intrauterine growth restriction and increased arterial resistance leading to hypertension and preeclampsia (42).

It has been shown that placental development occurs in a relatively low oxygen concentration, supported by secretions from the endometrial glands rather than the maternal circulation (43,44). It has been postulated that this environment protects the developing embryo from oxygen-free radical damage (45). Maternal arterial blood is prevented from entering the intervillous space of the placenta by plugs of

extravillous cytotrophoblast cells (EVT) that invade the mouths of the uterine spiral arteries (46). The maternal intraplacental circulation is only fully established towards the end of the first trimester when these plugs dislocate through a mechanism that is currently unknown (47). This phenomenon results in a shift from low oxygen tension to higher oxygen tension in the intervillous space at the end of the first trimester (48).

Although the rise in oxygen in the intervillous space was described as physiological, it results in some placental oxidative stress (48). To compensate for this elevation, a rise in antioxidant activity is observed as the placenta adapts to this new highly oxygenated environment. There is a strong rise in oxidative stress in the trophoblast associated with the onset of maternal blood circulation in the placenta. This coincides with an potentiation in placental activity of the antioxidants glutathione peroxidase and catalase in normal pregnancy (43). In the placenta, the cytotrophoblasts and the villous stromal cells can synthesize new antioxidants when exposed to ROS (49). However, if the capacity to synthesize new antioxidants is not sufficient to counterbalance the excessive amount of ROS, oxidative stress results in DNA and protein damage and lipid peroxidation (45).

Oxidative stress is an important factor in the pathophysiology of many complications during the second and third trimester of pregnancy. As stated above, inadequate placentation could result in an imbalance of oxidant/antioxidant activity leading to a chronic state of oxidative stress (48,50). Oxidative stress can result in several pregnancy complications such as preeclampsia (PE), which is characterized by maternal endothelial cell dysfunction resulting in systemic endovascular inflammation (51). Early PE (below 32 weeks of gestation) is often associated with IUGR (51).

### *Preeclampsia (PE)*

PE is one of the main diseases of pregnancy, characterized by hypertension and proteinuria, that generally affects pregnancies during the second or third trimester of gestation (52–57). PE is defined by maternal hypertension and proteinuria. In severe cases, the mother may develop comorbidities such as Disseminated Vascular Coagulation (DIC), edema, liver failure and eclampsia. Major fetal complications associated with PE are Fetal Growth Restriction (FGR) resulting in low birth weight, prematurity and fetal death (58–63). Although the pathogenic mechanisms of PE are not completely disclosed, local or systemic oxidative stress may explain the pathological features associated with this complication. It is known that the antioxidant capacity is affected in women with PE leading to an imbalance between the existing pro-oxidant and antioxidant systems with consequent oxidative stress (64). It is unclear whether oxidative stress is the cause or result of PE, despite placental insufficiency due to inadequate remodeling of the maternal vascularity that perfuses the intervillous space plays an important role in the development of this syndrome (64). This condition can lead to a complex process of uteroplacental ischemia-reperfusion with the release of cytotoxic factors into the maternal circulation with a consequent elevation in oxidative stress (65,66). Physiologically, the increase in oxidative stress is counterbalanced by the growth in the

synthesis of antioxidants (67), but, when oxidative stress overcomes the antioxidant defense in the placenta, oxidative damage could spread to distal tissues. Indeed, plasma membranes of circulating blood cells can oxidize passing through the ischemic placenta, thus helping to propagate oxidative stress to the distal tissues (68). Oxidative stress of the syncytiotrophoblast is one of the key characteristics of PE (69,70). It seems to be known that stressed syncytiotrophoblast can release a mix of factors such as pro-inflammatory cytokines, exosomes, anti-angiogenic agents and free fetal DNA into the maternal circulation (71). These factors could be responsible for the disruption of maternal endothelial function leading to a systemic inflammatory response, i.e. the clinical syndrome of PE (72).

#### *Fetal Growth Restriction (FGR)*

FGR is defined as the inability of the fetus to reach its genetically determined growth potential (52–56,73). Fetal growth depends on the availability of nutrients, which in turn is related to maternal diet (74,75), uteroplacental blood supply (65,76,77), development of placental villi, and the ability of the villous trophoblast and fetoplacental circulation to transport nutrients (58–61,78). Placental complications of pregnancy leading to FGR have their pathophysiological roots in the early stages of placentation and can manifest from the end of the first trimester of pregnancy (79). The action of placental oxidative stress, with associated necrosis and apoptosis of the trophoblastic epithelium of the placental villi, would compromise the placentation process (1,52–56,58–61). In this phase, the trophoblastic invasion is sufficient to allow early placentation phases of pregnancy but too superficial for the complete transformation of the uteroplacental arterial circulation, predisposing to a repetitive phenomenon of ischemia-reperfusion, with consequent chronic oxidative stress in the placenta and at the spread of maternal endothelial cell dysfunction (79). There is general agreement that poor spiral artery remodeling is the cause of placental changes that predispose to maternal vascular FGR (79).

#### *Gestational Diabetes Mellitus (GDM)*

The incidence of GDM is globally rising (80) affecting one in every four to five pregnancies (81). It is widely known that hyperglycemia can upregulate markers of chronic inflammation and contribute to augmented reactive oxygen species generation (62,82–88). Therefore, a pregnancy complicated with GDM is more likely to develop oxidative stress compared to uncomplicated pregnancy (89). It has been shown that maternal gestational diabetes during pregnancy can negatively affect fetal growth leading to macrosomia or intrauterine growth restriction (90). Moreover, it was demonstrated that GDM affects fetal neurodevelopment due to hypoxia, inflammation and oxidative stress that may compromise neuronal integrity (80).

Few studies were found about the role of neurotrophins in GDM (36). It was observed that one of the earliest abnormalities in pregnancies complicated with GDM is increased oxidative stress in the placenta (89). Placental release of 8-isoprostane was double in pregnant women with GDM

( $P < 0.001$ ) when compared to healthy controls. Superoxide dismutase activity and protein carbonyl content were elevated in placentae obtained from women with GDM ( $P < 0.04$  and  $P < 0.004$  respectively), whilst there was no significant difference in the activity of glutathione peroxidase (91).

Imbalances in maternal intake of Long-Chain Polyunsaturated Fatty Acid (LCPUFA) lead to elevated oxidative stress (92). Reports indicate that oxidative stress and LCPUFA such as docosahexaenoic acid influence levels of neurotrophins in mice (93).

During pregnancy, the deficiency of the antioxidant system can lead to embryonic and fetal exposure to the harmful effects of oxidative stress. There is a higher incidence of congenital malformations in the offspring of diabetic women, and some evidence suggests that higher lipid peroxidation levels and lower antioxidant levels may be causative factors (94). Women with GDM are also at an augmented risk for complications such as endothelial dysfunction and cardiovascular diseases (95).

Pharmaceutical approaches to modulate excessive oxidative stress and the associated adverse inflammatory reactions in pregnancy are scarcely practiced due to potential teratogenic effects (81). Recently, the prevention of pregnancy disorders through dietary intake has received more attention as a doable and relatively safe intervention. Dietary intervention (96) may reduce inflammation and the risk of GDM. A reduction and improvement in carbohydrate quality rather than a restriction in the high-fat content in the diet plays a major role. The habitual diet plays an important role in the improvement that can be expected from dietary adaptation as seen in women with GDM (97,98).

#### *Miscarriage*

In Italy, miscarriage refers to the unintentional termination of a pregnancy before the 180<sup>o</sup> day of amenorrhea or when fetal weight is  $< 500$  g (99). Recent studies have shown that 8% to 20% of clinical pregnancies end by spontaneous miscarriage before 20 weeks (100). The etiology is still controversial: chromosomal abnormalities, congenital anomalies, and maternal factors such as uterine anomalies, infection, diseases, and idiopathic causes constitute the main known causes (101,102).

Although it is known that oxidative stress is related to infertility both in men and women, it is still unclear if it is significant for the maintenance of a healthy pregnancy (103–109). As mentioned above, normal placentas experience an oxidative burst between 10 and 12 weeks of gestation with increased production of ROS. ROS levels will come back to normal as placental cells gradually acclimate to the newly oxidative surroundings (110). In cases of spontaneous miscarriage, the onset of maternal intraplacental circulation occurs prematurely and sporadically between 8 and 9 weeks of pregnancy in comparison to normal pregnancies (110,111). These placentas showed high levels of HSP70, nitrotyrosine (111,112), and markers of apoptosis in the villi, suggesting oxidative damage to the trophoblast with subsequent termination of the pregnancy (1). Antioxidant enzymes are unable to counterbalance ROS at this point since their expression and activity grow with gestational age (110).



## Alcohol

Alcohol harms pregnancy, causing miscarriage (113–115), teratogenesis (116,117), intrauterine growth restriction (118,119), stillbirth (115,120), premature birth (115,120), neonatal and infantile sequelae, as deformities and disabilities, related to Fetal Alcoholic Spectrum Disorders (FASD) (21,121–125). FASD has no genetic etiology and it is caused only by alcohol drinking during pregnancy (6,126–129). It has been suggested that ethanol can induce oxidative stress through many pathways, like redox state changes, production of the reactive product acetaldehyde, damage to mitochondria, direct or membrane effects caused by hydrophobic ethanol, ethanol-induced hypoxia, ethanol effects on the immune system and altered cytokine production and ethanol induction of CYP2E1 (37). CYP2E1 is a P450 that has the highest oxidation activity of alcohol to acetaldehyde. At low alcohol concentrations, CYP2E1 can reach about 10% of the liver's total alcohol oxidation capacity and its activity increases with the concentration of alcohol in the blood (38,130). CYP2E1 expression was detected as early as week 16 in the human fetal liver, and its level may further increase upon exposure to ethanol during pregnancy (131). Overall CYP2E1 expression increases with gestational age, as it was detected in about 37% of the second trimester and about 80% of the third trimester (132). Finally, the presence of CYP2E1 may be a major ROS-generating factor in the fetus following maternal alcohol consumption, and the low clearance rate may make the fetus more susceptible to ethanol-mediated abnormalities. CYP2E1 expression in the placenta may also vary in mothers who drink heavily (4 or more drinks per day – 1 unit = 12 grams of ethanol in Italy) making their fetuses more susceptible to ethanol-enhanced oxidative stress (133).

Moreover, it has been proved that oxidative stress can damage DNA, contributing to morphological and functional developmental disorders in animal models resulting from exposure to ethanol in utero or in embryo culture (134). ROS can cause altered signal transduction and oxidative macromolecular damage, including DNA damage and altered gene expression, which may contribute to teratogenesis (134–138).

The capability of the fetus to metabolize ethanol may vary during pregnancy. Low hepatic levels of Alcohol Dehydrogenase (ADH) activity in the fetus in the first trimester show that the fetus has a limited capacity to metabolize alcohol early (139). ADH activity gradually increases with gestational age (140).

A link between oxidation and FASD has been shown as a strong effect of alcohol exposure on the hippocampal proteome, culminating with the alternation of around 600 hippocampal proteins playing important roles in the axonal growth regulation, such as annexin A2, nucleobindin-1, and glypican-4, regulators of cellular growth and developmental morphogenesis and, in the cerebellum, cadherin-13, reticulocalbin-2, and ankyrin-2 (141). The increase in ROS in FASD also appears to be due to NOX enzymes belonging to the NADPH-dependent family of enzymes (142). The NOXs enzymes are expressed at the level of microglia, astrocytes, and the vascular system at the cerebral level, with an important role in the appropriate brain development (142).

The isoforms most involved in ROS production are NOX2 and NOX4 (143). In FASD patients, it would appear that early exposure to ethanol during pregnancy would increase the activity of NOX isoforms with a significant increase in ROS, cell damage, and ultimately apoptosis (143). This pathway, in conjunction with the above-mentioned activity of CYP2E1, would explain the increase in ROS and the consequent phenotype of FASD patients (144). The teratogenic effects of alcohol are thought to be the ultimate result of the ethanol-induced dysregulation of a variety of intracellular pathways, which ultimately culminate in toxicity and cell death (145). The generation of ROS as the possible result of ethanol exposure produces an imbalance in the intracellular redox state, leading to an overall increase in oxidative stress (146). This would explain the predominant effect that alcohol has on the brain regarding neurobehavioral impairment and deficient brain growth since brain tissue is rich in fatty acids, which chemically are the perfect substrate for ROS (147). As a consequence, fetal brain tissue results in damage during organogenesis, manifesting neurological dysfunctions after birth (146–149).

Notably, antioxidant supplementation during pregnancy could counteract or mitigate the oxidative elevation induced by alcohol abuse as shown also in animal models (13,150–159).

## Discussion

Figure 1 summarizes the role of oxidative stress in the pathogenesis of several obstetric complications. This short review aimed to highlight evidence about the role of oxidative stress in the pathophysiology of the main obstetric complications like placental pathology, PE, IUGR, gestational diabetes and miscarriage, with particular interest on the neglected role of alcohol misuse.

Negative effects of alcohol over health have been extensively proved causing dependence (160–164), liver damage (38), cancer (116,165–168) and FASD if drunk during pregnancy (21,35). Also, paternal alcohol use is considered relevant to fetal development (169–173).

Alcohol activity increases oxidative stress by increasing ROS levels and leading to macromolecular damage, endothelial damage, and impaired placentation. Particular attention must be paid to the presence of CYP2E1, probably being a ROS-generating factor in the fetus following maternal alcohol consumption and leading the fetus to be more susceptible to ethanol-mediated abnormalities in heavily drinking mothers (4 or more drinks per day) (89).

It is controversial if the effects of red wine could be mitigated by resveratrol (16): it was observed that animals early exposed to red wine had minor damage, probably due to the antioxidant effects of polyphenols. Data show that resveratrol or other polyphenols can effectively counteract serum free radicals' formation caused by alcohol intake, also contrasting alcohol-induced neurotrophin elevation in the liver. The observation of both negative and positive effects of red wine on health is known as the controversial "French Paradox" (174), showing that in France incidence of coronary heart diseases was low and it may be partly attributed to the protective function of red wine (175,176). Therefore,

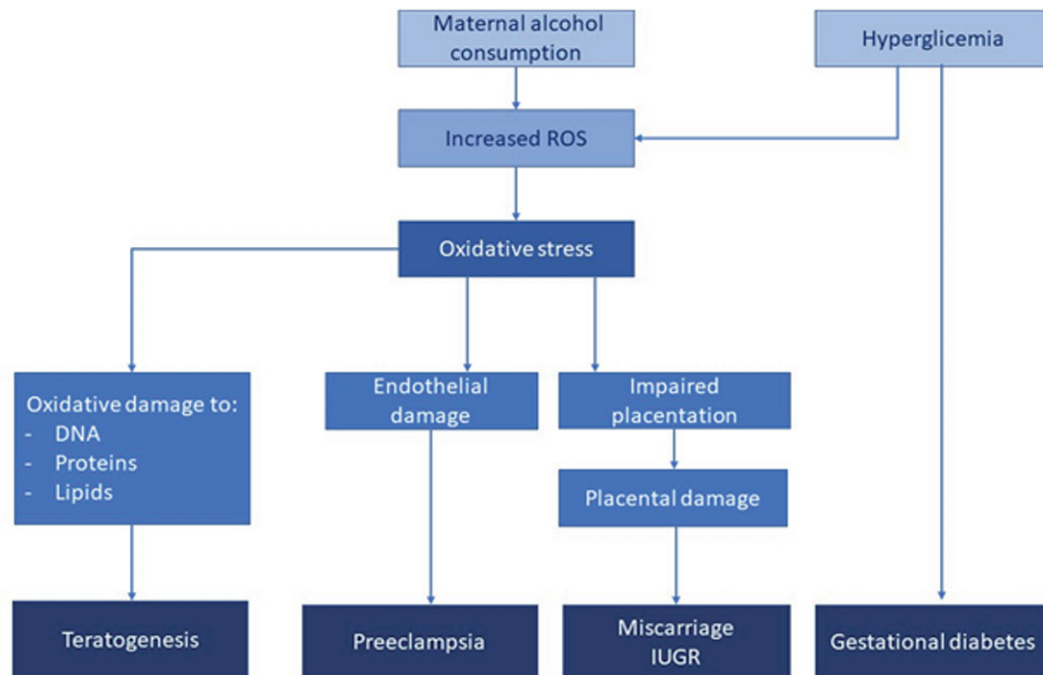


Fig. 1. Role of oxidative stress in the pathogenesis of main obstetric complications. ROS: Reactive Oxygen Species; IUGR: Intra Uterine Growth Restriction

several studies have issued the antitumoral potential of wine phenols, such as resveratrol and quercetin, showing that moderate red wine consumption (12-35 g of ethanol per day) may exert a protective effect (166,177).

It is still not clear if oxidative stress induced by red wine could be somehow mitigated by resveratrol and polyphenols, leading to minor damage to the pregnancy. However, the safest advice that healthcare professionals should give to women during pregnancy or when looking for a child is to completely avoid alcohol consumption (35).

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#### Conflict of interest

Authors have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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