

Australian women's perceptions about the causes of early pregnancy loss

Background

Early pregnancy loss (the loss of a pregnancy before 20 weeks of gestation) is an important public health issue – close to 4 in 10 Australian women who have ever been pregnant have had at least one.¹ Early pregnancy loss is often caused by problems with the fetus due to random chromosomal abnormalities, but many losses remain unexplained or unclear.²

Since many early pregnancy losses are unexplained, common misconceptions about the causes persist.^{3,4} Not knowing why the loss occurred can often lead women to feel they did something to cause it, or to experience blame from those around them.^{5,6}

As part of the 2025 National Women's Health Survey, we sought to better understand women's beliefs about the causes of early pregnancy loss, to inform strategies to improve awareness and education in Australia.

Close to

4 in 10 

Australian women who have ever been pregnant have had at least one early pregnancy loss.



Not knowing why the early pregnancy loss occurred can lead women to feel they did something to cause it, or to experience blame from those around them.

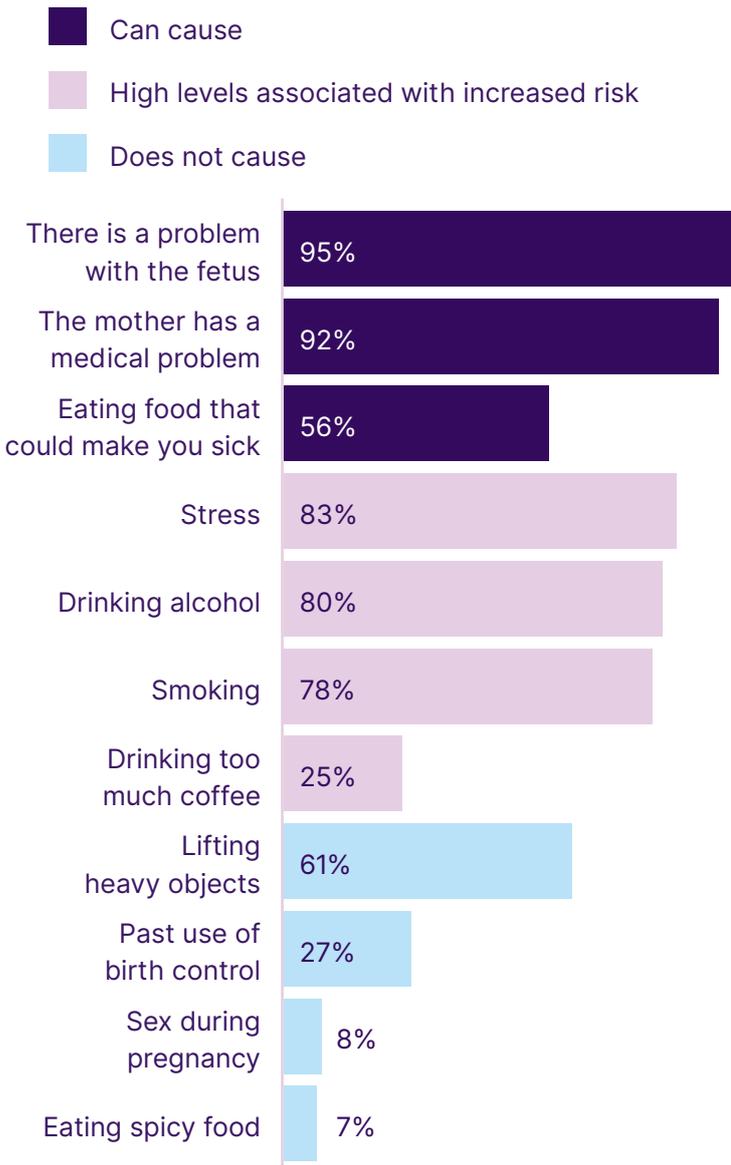
Australian women's perceptions of causes

There is limited scientific evidence about the risks for and causes of early pregnancy loss, but researchers have identified some factors that can cause – and others that do not cause – early pregnancy loss.²

We provided women with a list of some plausible causes and asked them to indicate which ones they believe can be a cause of early pregnancy loss. The list included some factors that can cause early pregnancy loss, factors that are associated with an increased risk of early pregnancy loss, and factors that do not cause early pregnancy loss.



Figure 1. Australian women’s perceptions of the causes of early pregnancy loss



Many women believed that stress, drinking alcohol, smoking and, to a lesser extent, drinking too much coffee could cause **early pregnancy loss.**

Factors that can cause early pregnancy loss

Problems with the fetus (e.g. genetic abnormality) and the mother having certain medical problems (e.g. cervical problems) are known causes of early pregnancy loss. Eating food that can make you sick with infections like listeriosis can also lead to miscarriage, especially in the early stages of pregnancy.^{7,8}

Almost all women correctly identified problems with the fetus (95%) and the mother having certain medical problems (92%) as potential causes of early pregnancy loss. Knowledge of these causes was consistently high across all age ranges.

Fewer women (56%) were aware that eating food that could make you sick could be a cause of early pregnancy loss.

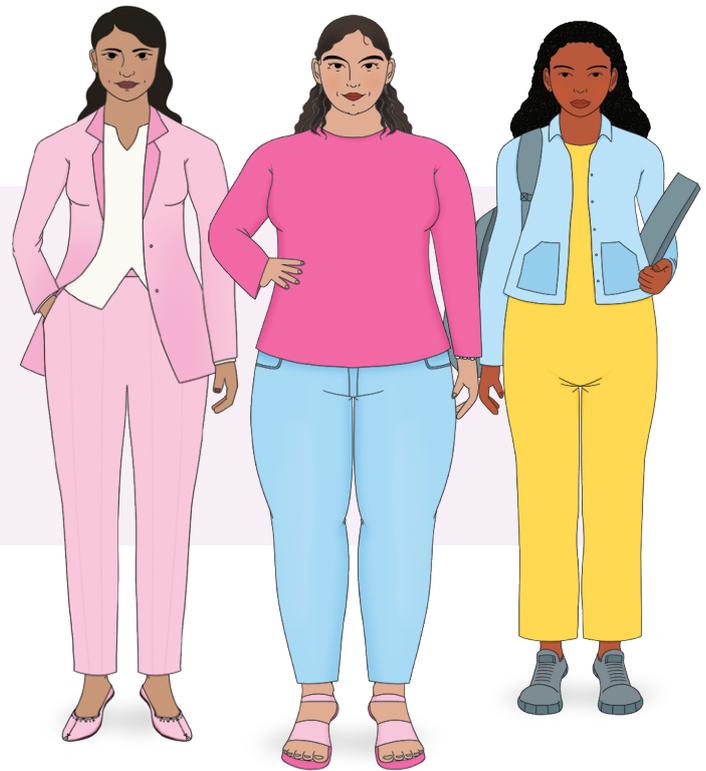
Risk factors for early pregnancy loss

Some factors can increase a person’s risk for early pregnancy loss, but they are not the main causes.²

For example, smoking,⁹ persistently high levels of stress,² and drinking large amounts of alcohol¹⁰ and coffee¹¹ are associated with a higher chance of early pregnancy loss. However, the size of the risk is related to the amount consumed or experienced (along with other individual factors).² Drinking less than 200mg of caffeine, or around 2 coffees per day, during pregnancy is considered safe. Similarly, normal levels of stress do not increase the risk of early pregnancy loss – only high levels of stress over a long period of time have been associated with an increased risk.²

Many women believed that stress (83%), drinking alcohol (80%), smoking (78%) and, to a lesser extent, drinking too much coffee (25%) could cause early pregnancy loss. Women aged 18 to 24 were more likely than women in older age groups to indicate that these could be possible causes of early pregnancy loss.

Misconceptions about the causes of early pregnancy loss can **exacerbate the impact** of the loss for some women.



Factors that do not cause early pregnancy loss

Lifting heavy objects,¹² past use of birth control,¹³ having sex during pregnancy,¹⁴ and eating spicy food do not cause early pregnancy loss. However, misconceptions about these behaviours as causes of early pregnancy loss persist.

Around 6 in 10 (61%) women believed that lifting something heavy could cause early pregnancy loss, and 3 in 10 (27%) believed that past use of birth control could cause an early pregnancy loss. Almost 1 in 10 believed that having sex during pregnancy (8%) or eating spicy food (7%) could cause an early pregnancy loss.



So what?

- Women in Australia are aware of the main known causes of early pregnancy loss, but some common misconceptions persist.
- Misconceptions about the causes of early pregnancy loss can exacerbate the impact of the loss for some women. They might also contribute to women avoiding health care that is known to be safe, such as using birth control, out of fear that it might harm future pregnancies.
- Education around the known causes of early pregnancy loss is needed to improve awareness and understanding among health care professionals and the Australian public. More scientific research into early pregnancy loss is also needed.
- Greater understanding and awareness of the causes of early pregnancy loss will improve maternal health care and help women make more informed decisions about their health, and the health of their baby, during pregnancy.

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About this short report

This short report includes data from the 2025 National Women’s Health Survey (NWHs).

The Jean Hailes National Women’s Health Survey (NWHs) is an annual survey designed to help us better understand the issues that affect women in Australia, their attitudes and behaviours and the health information and policy changes that will help improve their health and wellbeing.

The 2025 NWHs explored women’s experiences, attitudes and knowledge in relation to early pregnancy loss. It was conducted online in mid-2025 with a national sample, but only in English.

A total of 3,629 women aged 18 and over residing in Australia participated in the survey.

The 2025 NWHs was conducted in partnership with the Early Pregnancy Loss Coalition and Pink Elephants with funding from the Australian Government Department of Health, Disability and Ageing.

This short report was authored by Jean Hailes staff in collaboration with Isabelle Oderberg, Samantha Payne, Assoc Prof. Jade Bilardi, and Assoc Prof. Fran Boyle.

For more information about the NWHs, see the technical report on our [website](#).