

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD)

Alcohol used during pregnancy can lead to a wide range of harmful results for a developing fetus. These results or conditions are known as fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD), and can affect how a person looks, acts, learns, and grows. FASD is the leading known preventable cause of mental retardation and birth defects, and a leading known cause of learning disabilities. Due to a lack of accurate routine prenatal and pediatric screening, many children with FASDs remain undetected. FASD is one hundred percent preventable.

What is FASD

The term FASD refers to a range or group of conditions that include fetal alcohol syndrome, alcohol-related neurodevelopmental disorder or problems related to the development of the nervous system, and alcohol-related birth defects.

Although FASD can cause lifelong serious disabilities, including a combination of physical, behavioral and learning problems, the term FASD itself is not intended for use as a clinical diagnosis.


How alcohol exposure causes FASD

Alcohol can easily cross the placenta during pregnancy and enter the growing fetus through the umbilical cord. Depending on the amount and time of consumption, alcohol seriously affects developing tissues and organs, particularly the brain.

What are the signs and symptoms?

FASDs can affect each person in different ways and may range from mild to severe. Physical problems may include a small head size, abnormal facial features such as a smooth ridge between the nose and upper lip, dental abnormalities, bone defects, shorter-than-average height, low body weight, and heart, kidney, liver, vision and hearing problems.

Behavior and learning problems may include hyperactivity, difficulty in paying attention, poor memory, difficulty in school (especially with math), learning disabilities, speech and language delays, low IQ, and poor reasoning and judgment skills.



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Prevention of FASD

Since alcohol use among women of childbearing age is a leading and preventable cause of FASD, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) urges pregnant women not to drink alcohol any time during pregnancy or if they are planning to become pregnant.

Remember, no amount of alcohol consumption can be considered safe during pregnancy and alcohol can damage a fetus at any stage of pregnancy, even before a woman knows that she is pregnant.

Early intervention for infants and young children with FASD

The damage caused by prenatal alcohol exposure lasts for a lifetime and the health effects cannot be reversed or cured. However, research shows that early intervention and treatment can improve the affected child's development. The appropriate combination of interventions and support include medication, behavior and education therapy, and parent training.

What can you do if you think your child has FASD?

To help your child reach his or her full potential, it is very important to get help as early as possible. Talk to your child's health care provider about your concerns. You may ask to see a specialist such as a developmental pediatrician, child psychologist, or clinical geneticist.

Special school services can help with learning problems. Contact your local early intervention agency (for children younger than 3 years of age) or local public school (for children 3 years of age or older). For more information on screening and assessment process, please read "How to Get a Child Tested: Guidelines for Special Education Assessment" available online at www.ucsfchildcarehealth.org/pdfs/healthandsafety/SpecialEdAssesEN012606_adr.pdf.

Routines and consistency at home may help with behavior problems.

References and Resources

American Academy of Pediatrics, Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders: A call to action at www.medicalhomeinfo.org/downloads/pdfs/fasdfactsheet.pdf

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders at www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/fasd/

National Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (NOFAS) at www.nofas.org

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, FASD Center for Excellence: www.fasdcenter.samhsa.gov

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