

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASDs) are a group of conditions that can occur in a person whose mother drank alcohol during pregnancy. These effects can include physical problems and problems with behavior and learning. Often, people with FASDs have a mix of these problems.

If you think your child might have an FASD, talk to your health care provider.

What are FASDs?

FASDs refer to a range of effects that can happen to a person whose mother drank alcohol during pregnancy. These conditions can affect each person in different ways, and can range from mild to severe. They can affect the mind or the body, or both. Because FASDs make up a group of disorders, people with FASDs can exhibit a wide range and mix of symptoms.

Fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) is one condition among the full range of FASDs. A baby born with FAS has a small head, weighs less than other babies, and has distinctive facial features.

Some of the behavioral and intellectual disabilities of people with FASDs include:

- Difficulty with learning or memory
- Higher than normal level of activity (hyperactivity)
- Difficulty with attention
- Speech and language delays
- Low IQ
- Poor reasoning and judgment skills

People born with FASDs can also have problems with their organs, including the heart and kidneys.

What causes FASDs?

FASDs are caused by a woman's drinking alcohol during pregnancy. Alcohol in the mother's blood passes to the baby through the umbilical cord. When a woman drinks alcohol so does her baby.

There is no known amount of alcohol that is safe to drink during pregnancy or when trying to get pregnant. All drinks that contain alcohol, including wine and beer, can harm an unborn baby. There is no safe time to drink alcohol during pregnancy. Alcohol can harm a baby at any time during pregnancy. So, to prevent FASDs, a woman should not drink alcohol while she is pregnant, or even when she might get pregnant. This is because a woman could get pregnant and not know it for up to 4 to 6 weeks. In the United States, nearly half of all pregnancies are unplanned.

How many people have FASDs?

We do not know exactly how many people have an FASD. Few estimates are available. Based on community studies using physical examinations, experts estimate that the full range of FASDs among 6-7 year old children in the United States and some Western European countries might be as high as 2 to 5 out of 100 school children (or 2% to 5% of the population).



Are there treatments for FASDs?

FASDs last a lifetime. There is no cure for FASDs, but research shows that early intervention treatment services can improve a child's development.

There are many types of treatment options, including medication to help with some symptoms, behavior and education therapy, parent training, and other approaches. No one treatment is right for every child. Good treatment plans will include close monitoring, follow-ups, and changes as needed along the way.

There are a number of factors that can help reduce the effects of FASDs and help people with these conditions reach their full potential. These factors include:

- Diagnosis before 6 years of age
- A loving, nurturing, and stable home environment during the school years
- Absence of violence
- Involvement in special education and social services

What can I do if I think my child has an FASD?

Ask for a Referral

If you or your health care provider thinks your child could have an FASD, **ask your provider for a referral to a specialist** (someone who knows about FASDs), such as a developmental pediatrician, child psychologist, or clinical geneticist. In some cities, there are clinics whose staff have special training in diagnosing and treating children with FASDs. For providers and clinics in your area, visit the National and State Resource Directory from the National Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (NOFAS) www.nofas.org/resource-directory/ or call 800-66-NOFAS (66327).

Get an Evaluation

Call your state's public early childhood system to request a free evaluation to find out if your child qualifies for intervention services. You do not need to wait for a health care provider's referral or a medical diagnosis to make this call. Steps for a free evaluation from the state depends on your child's age:

For children younger than 3 years old, contact your local early intervention system at www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/parents/states.html. To learn more, visit www.parentcenterhub.org/repository/ei-overview/ or call (973) 642-8100.

For children 3 years old or older, contact your local public school system.

Even if your child is not old enough for kindergarten or enrolled in a public school, call your local elementary school or board of education and ask to speak with someone who can help you have your child evaluated.

To learn more, visit www.parentcenterhub.org/repository/schoolage/ or call (973) 642-8100.

To help your child reach his or her full potential, it is very important to get help for FASDs as early as possible!

For More Information

To learn more about FASDs, visit

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention www.cdc.gov/fasd or call 800-CDC-INFO
- American Academy of Pediatrics FASD Toolkit www.aap.org/fasd
- Center for Parent Information and Resources www.parentcenterhub.org/resources/ or call (973) 642-8100
- National Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (NOFAS) www.nofas.org or call 800-66-NOFAS (66327)
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's FASD Center for Excellence www.fasdcenter.samhsa.gov