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Special Needs

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) is an umbrella term that describes the range of effects that can occur in a person whose mother drank alcohol while pregnant. FASD affect an estimated 40,000 infants each year—more than spina bifida, Down syndrome, and muscular dystrophy combined.

What causes FASD?

The ultimate cause of FASD is alcohol intake by a pregnant mother. However, alcohol itself may not be directly responsible for all (or any) of the effects of FASD. What may be responsible are byproducts generated when the body metabolizes (“burns”) alcohol. The end result is a decrease in the number of brain cells (neurons), abnormal location of neurons (due to disturbance of their normal migration during fetal development), and gross malformation of the brain. Damage to the unborn baby is permanent. There is no cure for FASD.

What are the effects of FASD?

The effects of FASD vary among affected individuals. The effects can include physical, mental, behavioral, and/or learning disabilities with possible lifelong implications. Often, a person has a mix of these problems. FASD include the following categories:

- Fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS)—This is indicated by a pattern of neurological, behavioral, and cognitive deficits along with specific facial features.
- Alcohol-related neurodevelopmental disorder (ARND)—This term is used when only central nervous system abnormalities are present as a result of fetal alcohol exposure. ARND is characterized by problems with memory and motor skills.
- Alcohol-related birth defects (ARBD)—This is indicated by defects in the growth of skeletal and major organ systems.
- Fetal alcohol effects (FAE)—This term is sometimes used to describe children who had prenatal exposure to alcohol but do not have all of the symptoms (particularly the facial features) associated with FAS.



Who is at risk?

Any pregnant woman who drinks alcohol is at risk of having a child with FASD, regardless of her education, income, or ethnicity. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, women who are at particularly high risk of drinking during pregnancy and having a child with FASD include:

- Women with substance abuse or mental health problems
- Women who have already had a child with FASD
- Recent drug users
- Smokers
- Women who have multiple sex partners
- Recent victims of abuse and violence

How can FASD be prevented?

While there is no cure for FASD, it is 100 percent preventable when pregnant women abstain from alcohol. There is no known safe amount of alcohol to drink while pregnant. There also is no safe time during pregnancy to drink and no safe kind of alcohol. Good reproductive care before knowledge of pregnancy also assists to a great extent in the prevention of FASD. If you have questions about FASD, talk to your primary care physician and your dentist.