

Information on Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and support for individuals and caregivers after diagnosis

Introduction

There is no way to know for sure the impact that drinking alcohol might have on an unborn baby. It could have different effects at different times during pregnancy and might affect one baby but not another.

What we do know is that heavy drinking during pregnancy could increase the risk of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). There are also studies indicating that even low and moderate level drinking could affect the child.

The best thing a woman can do for her unborn baby is to avoid alcohol at all stages of pregnancy and while trying to conceive.

What is FASD?

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is a condition that may be diagnosed in a person who, before they were born, was exposed to alcohol.

When a pregnant woman drinks alcohol, the alcohol in her blood passes freely through the placenta into the developing baby. In the absence of a developed blood filtration system, the fetus is completely unprotected from alcohol circulating in its blood system. Alcohol can destroy brain cells and damage the nervous system and other organs of the baby at any point during the nine months of pregnancy (including before pregnancy is confirmed).

What effect does alcohol have?

Although alcohol can affect the development of cells and organs, the brain and nervous system are particularly vulnerable. FASD is characterised by damage to the developing brain, leading to abnormalities in how the brain works. This can show up in several different ways, such as problems with learning, attention, memory or language, and also difficulty with abstract concepts (eg maths, time and money), poor problem-solving skills, difficulty in learning from consequences and confused social skills.

Some, but not all individuals can also have physical effects, such as smaller head circumference, damage to the structure of the brain, heart or kidney problems, vision or hearing impairment and characteristic facial features.

While alcohol can cause harm to the unborn child at any time during pregnancy, the level of harm depends on the pattern of the mother's alcohol use – the percentage of alcohol in drinks, the number of drinks, and over what time the alcohol drinks were consumed. Binge drinking for example, means a high level of alcohol is consumed in a shorter period of time.

Is it safest to avoid alcohol completely if pregnant?

Yes. No alcohol means no risk of FASD. Alcohol can reduce a woman's chances of becoming pregnant and is also associated with an increased risk of miscarriage, premature labour and stillbirth.

In addition to the alcohol exposure, the vulnerability of a pregnancy and an unborn child may also be affected by other factors like genetics, family alcohol use across generations, the father's alcohol use prior to conception, the mother's age and general health (for example, nutrition, tobacco use) and other environmental factors like stress (exposure to violence, living with poverty, factors at work).

FASD is not always obvious at birth and might not be noticed until the child doesn't reach developmental milestones or behaviour and learning difficulties become a worry once the child starts school. FASD can also be first diagnosed in adolescence or adulthood. Different professionals might need to be involved to assess the areas of the child's life where help is most needed.

A person who was exposed to alcohol before they were born might now be any age. A proper diagnosis, appropriate services and support can help any person living with FASD to prevent behaviour from worsening, encourage attendance and participation at school, and help sustain work and build understanding, social relationships and friendships. Parents, families and communities need to be involved in this individual's life and work together. FASD lasts a lifetime but with the right help and caring, a good quality of life is possible. Care at home is incredibly important but can be challenging. Parents and carers need to care for themselves and be offered support too.

FASD Scotland and NOFAS-UK can help. Please contact us.

[FASD Scotland](#)

www.fasdscotland.com | Email: info@FASDscotland.com

FASD Scotland offers information and awareness about the lifelong risks of prenatal exposure to alcohol as well as support and advocacy to families caring for a child affected by FASD. It provides strategies for managing FASD and training for professionals involved with individuals affected by FASD. Through partnership with other agencies it aims to prevent FASD and reduce secondary disabilities.

[National Organisation for Foetal Alcohol Syndrome – UK](#)

NOFAS UK
022 China Works
100 Black Prince Road, Lambeth
London SE1 7SJ

Helpline: 020 8458 5951

www.nofas-uk.org | Email: help@nofas-uk.org

The NOFAS-UK Helpline responds to enquiries from parents, family members, carers and others needing advice or referrals for children with FASD disabilities. NOFAS-UK organises events focused on wellbeing for families and carers of children with FASD and provides resources that help support those with FASD at home and in school.

With grateful acknowledgement to NOFAS-UK and NOFASD Australia, from whom this information was adapted.