

What is Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)?

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is a general term that describes the range of disabilities that may affect a child if the child’s birth mother drank alcohol while she was pregnant. FASD is a major cause of preventable birth defects and the leading form of developmental delay in North America. FASD is not in itself a diagnosis.

The possible diagnoses within the range of disabilities include:

- Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS)
- Partial FAS (pFAS)
- Alcohol-Related Neuro-developmental Disorder (ARND)
- Alcohol-Related Birth Defects (ARBD)

Causes

When a woman drinks alcohol while she is pregnant, her baby may be born with FASD. There are many complex factors why a pregnant woman may drink, including poverty, unemployment, abuse and family violence. Sometimes these factors are beyond the woman’s control. She may drink alcohol to try to cope and then continue this behaviour while she is pregnant. FASD is also a risk for women who might drink alcohol without knowing they are pregnant or are unaware of the consequence of exposing the unborn baby (fetus) to alcohol. According to

the Canadian Community Health Survey (2003), 13.9% of women reported drinking alcohol at some point while they were pregnant. Therefore alcohol use while not using effective contraception can place a woman at risk for having an alcohol exposed pregnancy.

The effects of alcohol on the developing fetus can cause a range of physical disabilities, brain and central nervous system disabilities and behavioural problems. The effects that the child is born with are permanent and are known as the “primary disabilities”. Secondary disabilities “are disabilities that an individual is not born with, but may develop as a result of interaction with what society expects from children as they grow and develop.

The impact of alcohol on the fetus can range in severity and depends on factors like how much, when and how often the mother drinks, and the mother’s and baby’s genetic makeup and health. Recent studies have shown that drinking even small amounts of alcohol at any time while a woman is pregnant can have a negative impact on the developing brain of her unborn baby. Even consuming one or two drinks a week puts a baby at risk.

The Government of Canada recommends that there is no safe time or safe amount of alcohol to drink when pregnant or when planning to become pregnant.

Common Characteristics of People Diagnosed with FASD

Primary disabilities	Secondary effect
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ physical birth defects ▪ facial abnormalities ▪ physical health problems ▪ learning disabilities at school ▪ memory problems ▪ short attention span ▪ difficulty communicating feelings in an appropriate manner ▪ difficulty understanding the consequences of actions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ difficulty communicating thoughts and inability to control behaviour ▪ disrupted school experiences ▪ drug and alcohol abuse ▪ difficulty holding a job ▪ difficulty handling money ▪ interacting with others ▪ inappropriate sexual behaviour