



Foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD)

Information for pregnant women



Foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD)

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 it might affect one baby but not another.

What we do know is that heavy drinking and binge drinking during pregnancy could increase the risk of foetal* alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD).

At any stage of pregnancy, a woman can benefit her baby by avoiding alcohol.

What is FASD?

Foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) can be caused if a woman drinks alcohol during pregnancy.

FASD is an umbrella term that covers foetal alcohol syndrome (FAS), alcohol-related neurodevelopmental disorders (ARND), alcohol-related birth defects (ARBD), foetal alcohol effects (FAE) and partial foetal alcohol syndrome (pFAS).

When a pregnant woman drinks, the alcohol in her blood passes freely through the placenta into the developing baby's blood. Because the foetus does not have a fully developed liver, it cannot filter out the toxins from the alcohol as an adult can. Instead, the alcohol circulates in the baby's blood system. It can destroy brain cells and damage the nervous system of the foetus at any point during the nine months of pregnancy.

What effect does alcohol have?

The effects can be mild or severe, ranging from reduced intellectual ability and attention deficit disorder to heart problems and even death. Many children experience serious behavioural and social difficulties that last a lifetime.

Although alcohol can affect the development of cells and organs, the brain and nervous systems are particularly vulnerable. We can't see the neurological brain damage that is caused, but there are a number of invisible characteristics in babies born with FASD, which include:

- attention deficits
- memory deficits



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- hyperactivity
- difficulty with abstract concepts (eg maths, time and money)
- poor problem-solving skills
- difficulty learning from consequences
- confused social skills.

There are also a number of possible physical effects, including:

- smaller head circumference
- heart problems
- limb damage
- kidney damage
- damage to the structure of the brain
- eye problems
- hearing problems
- specific facial characteristics.

How many people are affected?

The incidence of FASD in the UK and internationally is not accurately known. Many children born with FASD are not diagnosed, or do not receive a correct diagnosis, which makes calculating the prevalence of the condition extremely difficult.

Why do women drink in pregnancy?

Women do not drink to intentionally harm their baby. There are a number of reasons why women might drink alcohol while they are pregnant: they might not know they are pregnant; they might be pressured socially; they might be trying to cope with problems and stress; or they might not have received any information about the risks of drinking alcohol during pregnancy.

Because there is no proven safe level for alcohol consumption during pregnancy, the only risk-free approach is to avoid alcohol completely – during pregnancy, when trying to conceive and when breastfeeding.



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At any stage of pregnancy, a woman can benefit her baby by avoiding alcohol. Healthcare providers may have suggestions to help with this.

Are there any other effects of alcohol that women should be aware of?

Alcohol can have other effects besides causing FASD. It can reduce a woman's chances of becoming pregnant and is also associated with an increased risk of infertility, miscarriage, premature labour and stillbirth.

What should you do if you think you are pregnant?

It is never too late to stop drinking.

If you need help to stop drinking or have any concerns or questions about pregnancy and alcohol:

- call the NOFAS helpline on 020 8458 5951
- visit the NOFAS website www.nofas-uk.org
- contact your GP or midwife.

Further information

The National Organisation for Foetal Alcohol Syndrome UK is dedicated to supporting people affected by FASD and their families. It promotes education for professionals and public awareness about the risks of alcohol consumption during pregnancy.

* To access international resources and medical studies outside the UK and online, use the international medical spelling 'fetal'.