

# Frequently Asked Questions about FASD

## Definition and Causes

- What are FASDs?
- How are FASDs caused?
- How common are FASDs?
- How are FASDs prevented?
- Does heavier drinking during pregnancy cause more harm to the baby?

## Issues for Families

- How are FASDs diagnosed?
- Can FASDs be cured?
- Are FASDs genetic or hereditary?
- Can drinking by the father cause an FASD?
- Can an FASD be passed along through breast milk?
- What costs are associated with FASDs?
- What are the main concerns for parents and family of a child with an FASD?

## Definition and Causes

### What are FASDs?

The term 'Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders' (FASD) describes a range of birth defects that can occur in any baby whose birth mother drank alcohol anytime during pregnancy. 'FASD' is not a diagnosis, but refers to a group of conditions. Even though each condition—or disorder—has unique features, all FASDs can result in physical, mental, and behavior problems, as well as learning disabilities. Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) is the most common and most serious disorder. Others are Alcohol-Related Neurodevelopmental Disorder (ARND) and Partial Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (pFAS). Other terms used less often include Alcohol-Related Birth Defects (ARBD) and Fetal Alcohol Effects (FAE).

For more information:

- Definition of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders  
[http://www.mofas.org/download\\_files/FASD\\_Definition.pdf](http://www.mofas.org/download_files/FASD_Definition.pdf)

### How are FASDs caused?

FASDs can happen only when a pregnant woman consumes alcohol. The alcohol in a pregnant woman's body crosses into the baby's blood, which can damage the brain and lead to an FASD. For more information:

- What You Need to Know: Effects of Alcohol on a Fetus  
[http://fasdcenter.samhsa.gov/documents/WYNK\\_Effects\\_Fetus.pdf](http://fasdcenter.samhsa.gov/documents/WYNK_Effects_Fetus.pdf)

### **How common are FASDs?**

Overall, FASDs affect an estimated 40,000 babies every year in the United States. Statistics for specific disorders (all U.S. figures):

- FAS affects between 5 and 20 per 10,000 live births. Among some Native American tribes, the rate is as high as 15 to 25 per 10,000.
- FAS, ARND, and ARBD combined affect at least 100 per 10,000 live births.

For more information: What You Need to Know:

- Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders By the Numbers [http://fasdcenter.samhsa.gov/documents/WYNK\\_Numbers.pdf](http://fasdcenter.samhsa.gov/documents/WYNK_Numbers.pdf)
- What You Need to Know: Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders Among Native Americans [http://fasdcenter.samhsa.gov/documents/WYNK\\_Native\\_American\\_Teal.pdf](http://fasdcenter.samhsa.gov/documents/WYNK_Native_American_Teal.pdf)

### **How are FASDs prevented?**

FASDs are 100% preventable. The only sure way to prevent FASDs is to totally avoid alcohol while trying to get pregnant, during pregnancy, or after having unprotected sex where it was possible to get pregnant. Current research shows that no amount of alcohol is sure to be safe to drink at any time during pregnancy.

For more information:

- What You Need to Know: Preventing FASD [http://fasdcenter.samhsa.gov/documents/WYNK\\_Preventing\\_FASD.pdf](http://fasdcenter.samhsa.gov/documents/WYNK_Preventing_FASD.pdf)
- Think Before You Drink (English-language brochure) <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/fas/publications/ThinkBeforeYouDrinkbrochure.pdf>
- Think Before You Drink (Spanish-language brochure) <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/fas/publications/ThinkbrochureSpanish.pdf>

### **Does heavier drinking during pregnancy cause more harm to the baby?**

***No amount of alcohol during pregnancy is guaranteed to be safe.*** However, it is true that women who drink heavily during pregnancy increase the risk of alcohol-related damage to their babies.

For more information:

- Alcohol Binges Early in Pregnancy Increase Risk of Infant Oral Clefts <http://www.newswise.com/articles/view/543107/?sc=rsmn>
- Occasional Binge Drinking During Pregnancy Seen Harmful [http://www.thejobcure.com/reuters\\_article.asp?id=20090126epid001.html](http://www.thejobcure.com/reuters_article.asp?id=20090126epid001.html)

## Issues for Families

### How are FASDs diagnosed?

Diagnosing FASDs can be difficult. If a birth mother drinks during pregnancy, being honest with her doctor will help avoid a wrong diagnosis. For the child, the earlier the diagnosis the better. A doctor can make a diagnosis alone, but may also seek opinions from other experts. The best treatment for FASDs will involve a range of healthcare professionals, such as psychologists, speech pathologists, social workers, and certain kinds of therapists.

For more information:

- Fetal Alcohol Syndrome: Guidelines for Referral and Diagnosis [http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/fas/documents/FAS\\_guidelines\\_accessible.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/fas/documents/FAS_guidelines_accessible.pdf)
- Fetal Alcohol Syndrome: Diagnosis, Epidemiology, Prevention, and Treatment
- <http://www.come-over.to/FAS/IOMsummary.htm>

### Can FASDs be cured?

No, FASDs cannot be cured, but with proper diagnosis, treatment, and a support network of family and friends, many people with an FASD can learn coping skills and lead happy lives.

### Are FASDs genetic or hereditary?

There is no evidence that FASDs are hereditary or genetic. In other words, FASDs do not “run in the family.”

### Can drinking by the father cause an FASD?

Current science shows that an FASD can only happen when a pregnant woman consumes alcohol. Science does not yet show that the father’s drinking prior to conception can cause an FASD. However, there is science that shows that a father’s drinking can affect the genes of the next generation or the one after that<sup>1-3</sup>. This process is called epigenetics.

The best way a father can help prevent FASD is to help the mother avoid alcohol while she is pregnant.

<sup>1</sup> Haycock, P.C. (2009). Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders: The epigenetic perspective. *Biology of Reproduction*, 81(4), 607-617.

<sup>2</sup> Hegedus, A. M., Tarter, R. E., Hill, S. Y., Jacob, T., & Winsten, N. E. (1984). Static Ataxia: A possible marker for alcoholism. *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*, 8, 580-582.

<sup>3</sup> Tarter, R. E., Hegedus, A. M., Goldstein, G., Shelly, C., & Alterman, A. I. (1984). Adolescent sons of alcoholics: Neuropsychological and personality characteristics. *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*, 8, 216-222

### **Can an FASD be passed along through breast milk?**

Alcohol in breast milk is not linked to FASDs. However, when a woman who is breastfeeding drinks alcohol, some of that alcohol does enter her breast milk. Research shows that alcohol in the milk can harm a child's development, sleep, and learning.

For more information:

- Alcohol's Effect on Lactation  
<http://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/arh25-3/230-234.htm>

### **What costs are associated with FASDs?**

- The estimated lifetime cost of caring for a person with an FASD is between \$1.4 million and \$1.5 million.
- For one individual with FAS, the most severe form of FASD, the lifetime cost is estimated at \$2 million. The overall costs of FAS for our nation as a whole may be as high as \$6 billion each year. These estimates do not include costs such as time lost from work, the burden on families, and poor quality of life.

For more information:

- The Financial Impact of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome <http://fasdcenter.samhsa.gov/publications/cost.cfm>

### **What are the main concerns for parents and family of a child with an FASD?**

Parents of children with FASDs face unique challenges. A child with an FASD may get into trouble or act out, they may need to be told things many times, and they may do things without understanding the consequences. When they get older, they may not be able to live alone. However, studies have shown that early diagnosis and a stable, positive environment can improve the outlook for people with an FASD. Several groups have developed materials to help parents and family members.

For more information:

- What You Need to Know: Independent Living for People With Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders [http://fasdcenter.samhsa.gov/documents/WYNKIndLiving\\_6\\_colorJA\\_new.pdf](http://fasdcenter.samhsa.gov/documents/WYNKIndLiving_6_colorJA_new.pdf)
- The Minnesota Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome: Educational Resources <http://www.mofas.org/education.html>
- Can I Catch It? (brochure for siblings)
- <http://download.ncadi.samhsa.gov/Prevline/pdfs/SMA06-4247.pdf>

Adoptive parents can refer to:

- What You Need to Know: Adopting and Fostering Children With Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders [http://fasdcenter.samhsa.gov/documents/WYNK\\_Adoption.pdf](http://fasdcenter.samhsa.gov/documents/WYNK_Adoption.pdf)