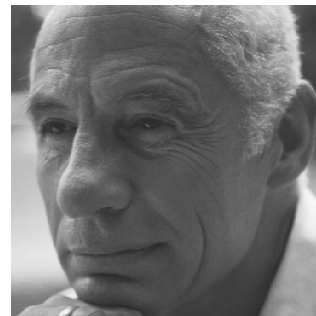




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# Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)



## What is Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)?

There's a lot to know about Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, or FASD. Here are answers to some of the questions often asked about FASD. Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is a term that describes a range of disabilities that may affect people whose mothers drank alcohol while they were pregnant. The diagnoses of FASD are:

- ✦ Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS)
- ✦ partial Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (pFAS)
- ✦ alcohol-related neurodevelopmental disorder (ARND), and
- ✦ alcohol-related birth defects (ARBD)





## How do you get FASD?

The only way someone can get FASD is if their mother drank alcohol when she was pregnant.

Alcohol causes brain damage in the developing baby.

**THERE IS NO SAFE AMOUNT OF ALCOHOL DURING PREGNANCY.** There is also no safe **TIME** to drink alcohol during pregnancy.

There is no gene for FASD! This means that a mother who is diagnosed with FASD will not pass it to her child if she does not drink when she is pregnant.

## Can FASD be cured?

Unfortunately, FASD cannot be cured. People live with FASD for their entire life.

However, people with FASD can still do very well with helpful supports and services. Some examples include special education, vocational programs, tutors, structured environments, and lifelong care. They can find paid work or go to school if given special assistance.



## What's different about the way people with FASD may behave?

If women drink when they are pregnant, their babies may have brain damage. This means that children and adults who are affected may have a hard time learning and controlling their behaviour. For example, they may appear to learn how to do a new task one day, and not remember the next. Other common problems include having trouble :

- ✧ adding, subtracting and handling money
- ✧ thinking things through / reasoning
- ✧ learning from experience
- ✧ understanding consequences of their actions
- ✧ remembering things, and
- ✧ getting along with others.

Because of their disabilities, people who are affected by FASD may have special needs that require life long help - even throughout adulthood - regarding :

- ✧ handling money, such as paying rent and buying food
- ✧ learning from their experiences and making changes in their behaviour
- ✧ understanding consequences of their behaviour, or "cause and effect"
- ✧ interacting with other people socially, and
- ✧ keeping a job.

Affected people may develop mental health problems, have trouble with the law, drop out of school (or be disruptive in a classroom), are unemployed and/or may develop alcohol and drug problems. They may even be homeless.



We also know that people with FASD may be very good at many things. They may be loving, affectionate, friendly, artistic, musical, work well with animals and plants, be very loyal and show a great determination to succeed in life!

## How much drinking by the biological mother can cause FASD?

Alcohol causes brain damage in the developing baby. **THERE IS NO SAFE AMOUNT OF ALCOHOL DURING PREGNANCY.** There is also no safe **TIME** to drink alcohol during pregnancy.

We know that a baby's brain is very sensitive to alcohol while it is developing, but we don't know how much alcohol it takes to cause damage. Research shows that children born to mothers who drank as little as 1 drink per day during pregnancy, may have behaviour and learning problems.<sup>6</sup> Binge drinking - or drinking a large amount of alcohol in a short amount of time - is especially damaging to the developing baby.

Stopping or cutting down drinking alcohol while pregnant will make the baby healthier. No alcohol during pregnancy is the best (and the safest!) choice for having a healthy baby. If you are planning a pregnancy or not using reliable birth control, avoid alcohol. Remember that friends, family and community members can all help a pregnant woman not to drink during pregnancy.

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<sup>6</sup> Sood B, Delancy-Black V, Covington C, Nordstrom-Klee B, Ager J, Templin T, Janisse J, Martier S, Sokol RJ. Prenatal alcohol exposure and childhood behavior at age 6 to 7 years: I. dose-response effect. *Pediatrics*. 2001 Aug;108(2):E34.

## How do you know if you have FASD?

Anyone may have FASD if their biological mother drank alcohol during pregnancy and they may have problems with learning, remembering things, attention span, communicating, doing math and/or controlling their behaviour. People with FASD may be small, their faces may look different, and they may have vision and/or hearing problems.

It is sometimes confused with developmental delays and behavioural difficulties. Only a specially-trained doctor can tell for sure and give a complete diagnosis.

## How many people have FASD?

FASD affects approximately 1% of people living in Canada<sup>1,2,3,4,5</sup>. This means that there may be about 300,000 living in Canada today with FASD. People of all ages may be affected.

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<sup>1</sup> Robinson, GC, Conry, JL, Conry, RF. Clinical profile and prevalence of fetal alcohol syndrome in an isolated community in British Columbia. CMAJ 1987; 137(3): 203-7.

<sup>2</sup> Williams, RJ, Odaibo FS, McGee JM. Incidence of fetal alcohol syndrome in northeastern Manitoba. Can J Public Health 1999; 90(3): 192-4.

<sup>3</sup> Square, D. Fetal alcohol syndrome epidemic on Manitoba reserve. CMAJ 1997; 157(1): 59-60.

<sup>4</sup> Habbick, BF, Nanson, JL, Snyder, RE, Casey, RE, Schulman, AL. Foetal Alcohol Syndrome in Saskatchewan: Unchanged incidence in a 20-year period. Can J Pub Health 1996; 87(3): 204-207.

<sup>5</sup> Asante, KO, Nelms-Maztke, J. Report on the survey of children with chronic handicaps and Fetal Alcohol Syndrome in the Yukon and Northwest British Columbia. Council for Yukon Indians 1985; Whitehorse, YT

## Can biological fathers cause FASD?

No. FASD can be caused only when a mother drinks alcohol during pregnancy and the baby is exposed to alcohol before it is born. However, it is known that women with partners who drink are more likely to drink themselves during pregnancy, so a big role for future fathers is to support the women's choice not to drink during pregnancy.



## Does drinking during breastfeeding cause FASD?

No. Again, FASD can be caused only by exposure to alcohol during pregnancy. But, if you drink alcohol while breastfeeding, alcohol passes into the breast milk and the baby drinks it. The baby's brain and spinal cord (central nervous system) continue to grow after birth, and can be affected by alcohol. Studies show that alcohol in breast milk interferes with the mother's milk production and causes babies to eat less and to sleep less.<sup>7</sup>

Breastfeeding mothers who choose to drink alcohol after giving birth should carefully plan a feeding schedule. They could do this by pumping and storing milk before drinking and/or waiting until all of the alcohol is out of their bodies before breastfeeding.

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<sup>7</sup> Mennella JA. Regulation of milk intake after exposure to alcohol in mothers' milk. Alcohol Clin Exp Res. 2001 Apr;25(4):590-3.

## Prevention of FASD

FASD can be prevented! Alcohol use during pregnancy is the only cause for this disability.

If you're pregnant, or planning to be pregnant, don't drink alcohol. If you need help to stop drinking, look for someone who works in the addictions field to help you. If you are the partner, family member or friend, you can support a pregnant woman by not drinking, and encouraging her not to drink alcohol at this time.

## Where can I go for help?

If you need help to stop drinking, the best thing is to find help as soon as possible. Some suggestions about alcohol use are :

- Your doctor, community health nurse, midwife or other health care provider
- Your local public health unit, community health/resource centre, or Friendship Centre
- Your provincial or territorial Ministry of Health (or Health and Social Services)
- The FASD Information Service (Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse), an information and reference service at **1(800) 559-4514**

