

Why is it important to address Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)?

Alcohol-related birth defects have many health, social and economic costs. For example, public health, health care, education outcomes, employment, justice, policing, corrections, child and family social services and welfare systems are all affected by FASD.

Incidence

While there are no national statistics on the rates of FASD in Canada, international estimates are that 9 in every 1000 babies are born with FASD. This means that more than 3,000 babies are born in Canada each year with FASD, and approximately 300,000 people are currently living with this lifelong disability. However, this rate may be even higher because FASD is hard to diagnose, and a diagnosis may not be made early in a child's life, or may be missed entirely.

Recent research funded by the Canadian Institutes for Health Research and conducted by the Hospital for Sick Children shows that in one Ontario county 3.7% of women drank alcohol in the last six months of their pregnancy. However, the actual rate may be higher because women may drink before knowing they are pregnant.

Other studies have shown that drinking even small amounts of alcohol during pregnancy can have a negative impact on the developing brain of an unborn baby. According to the Canadian Community Health Survey (2003), 13.9% of women reported drinking alcohol at some point while they were pregnant.

Economic Costs

FASD carries very high costs for society. For families with a child diagnosed with FASD, a recent Canadian study showed their annual costs for medical and other treatments was approximately \$24,000 per year. Based on the current Canadian population, people with FASD aged 0 to 21 represent a potential annual cost of over \$571 million. These costs do not include the lost potential of each affected person or other costs incurred later in life.

Social Costs

The social costs of FASD are also high. As children age, secondary effects of FASD begin to appear, affecting their ability to function and adapt to society. These secondary effects can lead to social problems such as disrupted school time, drug and alcohol abuse, difficulty holding a job, difficulty handling money, problems interacting with others and inappropriate sexual behaviour.

Early Diagnosis

If FASD is diagnosed early, interventions may be able to lessen its impact. For example, an effective management plan for ongoing supports can help prevent people with FASD from developing secondary disabilities and can help them lead more productive lives. Research shows that individuals exposed to alcohol before birth, who began participating in developmental programs between birth and age five, have experienced positive results. Employment coaching and supported living can also help the person with FASD to find and keep a job and become independent with ongoing supports. Despite their disabilities, people with FASD have many positive qualities and can enjoy very successful lives.