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The National Women's Health Information Center

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Frequently Asked Questions about Fetal Alcohol Syndrome

What is fetal alcohol syndrome?

Fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) is a group of birth defects caused by drinking alcohol during pregnancy. Children with FAS have many physical, mental and behavioral problems and may be mentally retarded. They are small, underweight babies. As they get older, they often have trouble with learning, attention, memory, and problem solving. They may have poor coordination, be impulsive, and have speech and hearing problems.

The effects of FAS last a lifetime. Most children with FAS have trouble with work and with personal relationships when they become adults. Many have legal problems.

FAS cannot be reversed, but it can be prevented by not drinking alcohol when pregnant.

What are the most common birth defects or problems of FAS?

Children with FAS have:

- Facial features that are not normal, such as a thin upper lip, short nose, short eye openings, and flat cheeks and *philtrum* (the groove in the middle of the upper lip).
- Growth retardation. They are small and underweight from birth.
- Brain damage. They may be mentally retarded or have problems with development, learning, and behavior.

All of these birth defects are caused by drinking alcohol in pregnancy.

If a child has some but not all of the alcohol-related problems of FAS, they are sometimes said to have *fetal alcohol effects* (FAE). Two newer terms are:

- *Alcohol-related birth defects* (ARBD). This term is used when a child does not have FAS, but does have one or more physical birth defects caused by alcohol. These may be physical defects of the face, eyes, ears, heart, brain, or limbs.
- *Alcohol-related neurodevelopmental disorder* (ARND). This term is used when a child does not have FAS, but does have some brain damage caused by alcohol. Children with ARND are harder to identify than children with ARBD or FAS. They often have trouble in school and have behavior problems.

How does alcohol cause these problems?

When a pregnant woman drinks beer, wine, hard liquor, or other alcoholic beverages, alcohol gets into her blood. The alcohol in the mother's blood goes to her baby through the *umbilical cord*. When the alcohol enters the baby's body, it can cause birth defects.

Drinking alcohol in the early stages of pregnancy can cause the facial and other physical defects of FAS. Drinking alcohol at any time during pregnancy can slow down the baby's growth and affect the baby's brain. There is no time during pregnancy when there is no chance at all of hurting your baby if you drink alcohol.

Can FAS be cured?

No. But children with FAS can be helped. They may need hearing aids or eyeglasses. They should get regular medical care. When they go to school, they need special help. As children with FAS get older, they may need special services and support to help them live on their own.

Is it okay to drink a little alcohol during pregnancy?

There is no known safe level of alcohol a pregnant woman can drink and not affect her baby. It is best to drink no alcohol at all—

- if you are trying to get pregnant,
- if there is a chance you could possibly be pregnant, or
- if you are pregnant.

Not all women who drink alcohol during pregnancy will have a child born with FAS. But not drinking alcohol is the only sure way to protect your baby from FAS, ARBD and ARND. If you are pregnant and have been drinking, stop drinking now to protect your baby. If you need help to stop drinking, talk with your health care provider.

For more information...

For more information about fetal alcohol syndrome, contact the National Women's Health Information Center (NWHIC) at 1-800-994-9662 or the following organizations:

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism

Phone Number(s): (301) 433-3860 (Information Office)

Internet Address: <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov>

National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities

Phone Number(s): (888) 232-6789

Internet Address: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/fas>

March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation

Phone Number(s): (888) 663-4637

Internet Address: <http://www.modimes.org>

National Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome

Phone Number(s): (800) 666-6327

Internet Address: <http://www.nofas.org/>

This information was abstracted from fact sheets prepared by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities.

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