

# WHAT IS FOETAL ALCOHOL SPECTRUM DISORDER?



## What is foetal alcohol spectrum disorder?

Foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) is the umbrella term for a range of preventable alcohol-related birth defects caused as a direct result of drinking alcohol when pregnant.

There is no way to know for sure how alcohol might affect an unborn baby. It could have different effects at different times during pregnancy, and it might affect one baby but not another. Because there is no proven safe level for alcohol consumption during pregnancy, the only risk-free approach is to avoid alcohol completely when pregnant.

This is because alcohol is a teratogen – a substance that interferes with the development of the baby, and alcohol can pass freely from the mother through the placenta into the baby's blood. Because a baby does not have a developed liver, it cannot filter out the toxins from alcohol as a mother can, so alcohol in the baby's blood can kill brain cells and damage the nervous system affecting the baby's brain and physical development.

## What if I drank alcohol or got drunk not knowing I was pregnant?

Since 2016 the UK Chief Medical Officers have recommended that if someone is pregnant or planning a pregnancy, the safest approach is not to drink alcohol to keep risks to the baby to a minimum.

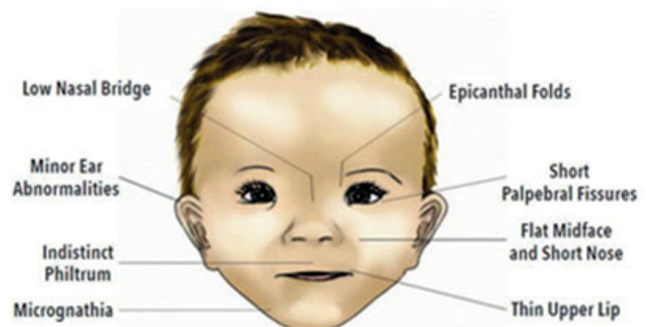
Drinking in pregnancy can lead to long-term harm to the baby, with the more drunk the greater the risk. Other risk factors include:

- being an older mother,
- smoking
- poor diet: especially a diet low in folates.

## The effects of FASD on a child

FASD affects at least 3 neurocognitive domains (SIGN, 2019) and can range from reduced learning ability or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) to physical defects. Many children experience serious behavioural and social difficulties that last a lifetime. There are also a number of possible physical effects that may include:

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



There are invisible FASD characteristics, which may include:

- attention and memory problems
- hyperactivity
- difficulty with abstract concepts (e.g. maths, time and money)
- poor problem-solving skills
- difficulty learning from consequences
- poor judgement
- poor impulse control and anger management
- confused social skills such as being too friendly with strangers

### **Symptoms as the children get older**

A study found that for children with FASD, problems as they got older included:

- Mental health problems: Diagnosed with ADHD, Clinical Depression, or other mental illness, experienced by over 90% of children with FASD.

For those aged 12 and older:

- 60% are suspended or expelled from school or dropped out of school.
- Trouble with the law: 60% are charged or convicted with a crime.
- Alcohol and drug problems: 35% experience abuse or dependency.
- Confinement: about 50% experience inpatient psychiatric care, inpatient chemical dependency care, or are imprisoned for a crime.
- Inappropriate sexual behaviour: About 50% exhibit inappropriate sexual behaviour such as sexual advances, sexual touching, or promiscuity.

Two additional secondary disabilities exist for adults:

- Dependent living: 80% live in a group home, live with family or friends, or some sort of assisted living.
- Problems with employment: 80% required ongoing job training or coaching, can't keep a job or are unemployed.

### **Protective factors and strengths**

The same study found that although FASD cannot be cured, factors can help such as:

- Living in a stable and nurturing home for over 73% of life.
- Being diagnosed with FAS before age six.
- Never having experienced violence.
- Remaining in each living situation for at least 2.8 years.
- Experiencing a "good quality home" (meeting 10 or more defined qualities) from age 8 -12.
- Having been found eligible for support and services.

Researchers have identified the following talents as strengths that often stand out for those with FASD:

- Music, playing instruments, composing, singing, art, spelling, reading, computers, mechanics, woodworking, skilled vocations (welding, electrician, etc.), writing, poetry.
- Participation in non-impact sport or physical fitness activities.

### **Further information**

For more information about FASD, go to [nofas-uk.org](http://nofas-uk.org). For specialist advice and support, email [help@nofas-uk.org](mailto:help@nofas-uk.org) or call 020 8458 5951. The Prevent FASD website is aimed at young people (15-25). For young people who are pregnant and have been drinking there is information and sources of additional support [preventfasd.info/risk-resources/](http://preventfasd.info/risk-resources/)

### **Other useful sources for information**

Alcohol and pregnancy - Preventing and managing fetal alcohol spectrum disorders BMA (2016) - [bma.org.uk/media/2082/fetal-alcohol-spectrum-disorders-report-feb2016.pdf](http://bma.org.uk/media/2082/fetal-alcohol-spectrum-disorders-report-feb2016.pdf)  
SIGN 156 Children and young people exposed prenatally to alcohol - A national clinical guideline Jan 2019 - [sign.ac.uk/media/1092/sign156.pdf](http://sign.ac.uk/media/1092/sign156.pdf)

PHE Maternity high impact area: Reducing the incidence of harms caused by alcohol in pregnancy (2020) - [assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/942477/Maternity\\_high\\_impact\\_area\\_4\\_Reducing\\_the\\_incidence\\_of\\_harms\\_caused\\_by\\_alcohol\\_in\\_pregnancy.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/942477/Maternity_high_impact_area_4_Reducing_the_incidence_of_harms_caused_by_alcohol_in_pregnancy.pdf)