

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS)

What is fetal alcohol syndrome?

Fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) is a set of mental and physical problems that can develop when a fetus is exposed to alcohol in the womb, and it is one of the leading and most preventable causes of developmental, behavioral, and learning disabilities. The National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD) estimates that 4,000 to 12,000 babies are born each year with FAS and many thousands more with less-disabling fetal alcohol effects (FAE). Though estimates range widely, 40,000 to 375,000 babies exposed to illicit drugs through maternal use are born each year. These statistics do not include nicotine exposure, which also has negative health effects on the fetus.

What causes fetal alcohol syndrome?

Drinking during pregnancy causes FAS. Women who drink heavily (an average of five drinks per day) can have babies with withdrawal problems, abnormal reflexes, sleeping disorders, and other problems. Those who drink less (one to two drinks per day) and those who smoke during pregnancy are likely to have babies with low birth weight. The amount of damage caused by maternal alcohol use depends on the timing and amount of alcohol consumed. Studies have shown conflicting results related to effects on the fetus exposed to minimal or occasional drinking.

What effect does alcohol and other drug use have on a fetus?

Physical symptoms of FAS include growth deficiency, dysfunction of the central nervous system, and facial abnormalities. Cognitive and other effects can include developmental delays, intellectual impairment, behavior problems, and difficulty with coordination, attention, memory, learning, impulse control, problem solving, speech, and hearing. These symptoms cannot be reversed. Children with FAE display some but not all of the symptoms associated with FAS.

continued

Personal Recovery Story

“Abstinence is the best policy because we don’t know how much damage even one drink can do.”

—*Sasha, mother of son with FAS*

can fathers cause fetal alcohol syndrome?

Research has shown that exposing a male rat to alcohol can alter the growth, behavior, and reproductive functions of that animal’s descendants. This is true even when the mother rat is free of alcohol and other drugs. Male rats consuming alcohol had fewer offspring than alcohol-free rats, and the offspring that did survive were smaller, experienced more behavioral and hormonal disturbances, and had lowered immunity to disease.

At least one human study notes a relationship between fathers’ drinking in the month before conception and the birth weight of their babies. In the study, “regular drinking” was defined as consuming at least two drinks per day or consuming about five drinks or more on a single occasion at least once a month. Infants whose fathers drank regularly weighed less than infants whose fathers were occasional drinkers. These results occurred regardless of the mother’s alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana use during any period of the pregnancy.

Alcohol consumption is just one paternal behavior that can affect the life of a newborn. The safest policy is for both men and women to abstain from alcohol and other drugs while they are trying to conceive a child. It’s true that researchers disagree about how much alcohol a woman can safely consume at conception and during pregnancy. Even so, many women who want children choose to abstain completely. When men make the same decision, they not only create a supportive bond with their partners but also affirm their intention to bring a healthy child into the world.

Shared abstinence is one way for men and women to say, “We are going to commit to each other. We’re going to have a child. And for the child’s sake, we’ll both give up drinking.”

How can you deal with the guilt and shame of causing fetal alcohol syndrome?

Many women experience guilt and shame after the birth of a baby with FAS or FAE. In the past, you may have dealt with shame and guilt by drinking and using drugs, but this only deepens feelings of worthlessness.

Shame is an especially bad problem for people in recovery. If you have feelings of shame that you have not addressed, you are at risk for relapse. You've worked hard in early recovery, but to maintain your ongoing recovery, you'll need to keep working the Twelve Steps. Step Four and Step Five are particularly helpful when dealing with issues of guilt and shame. Recovery is the process by which you will be restored to a more fulfilling life with fewer emotional hardships and freedom from addictive behavior.

Remember to work the Steps, utilize your sponsor and sober friends for support, and go to meetings. These things will help you let go of shame and guilt, and develop and maintain a healthy, happy outlook where you can enjoy the freedom and peace of sobriety.