

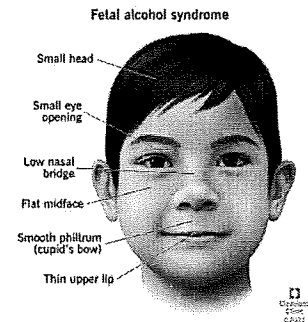
# Fetal Alcohol Syndrome

## Overview

Facial features of a child with fetal alcohol syndrome

### What is fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS)?

Fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) is a condition that develops in a fetus (developing baby) when a pregnant person drinks alcohol during pregnancy. A syndrome is a group of symptoms that happen together as the result of a particular disease or abnormal condition. When someone has fetal alcohol syndrome, they're at the most severe end of what are known as fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASDs).



FAS is a life-long condition that can't be cured. This condition can be prevented if you don't drink any alcohol during pregnancy. It's possible that even small amounts of alcohol consumed during pregnancy can damage your developing fetus.

### What's the difference between fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) and fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASDs)?

When a fetus is exposed to alcohol before birth, the baby's development can be affected in many different ways. The impact of alcohol use may create mild or severe symptoms. Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) is this group of signs and symptoms on a scale from least to most effects. Fetal alcohol syndrome is the most severe condition on this scale.

## Symptoms and Causes

### What causes fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS)?

Fetal alcohol syndrome happens when a person drinks any alcohol during pregnancy, including wine, beer, hard ciders and "hard liquor". Without alcohol use, FAS doesn't happen. One reason alcohol is dangerous during pregnancy is that it's passed through your bloodstream to the fetus through the umbilical cord. The baby doesn't metabolize (break down) alcohol in the same way an adult does – it stays in the body for a longer period of time.

Alcohol can interfere with the normal development of the fetus, particularly the brain and central nervous system. This occurs in any of the following ways:

- Alcohol can kill cells in different parts of the fetus, causing abnormal physical development.
- Alcohol interferes with the way nerve cells develop, how they travel to form different parts of the brain and their functioning.
- Alcohol constricts blood vessels, which slows blood flow to the placenta (food supply while in the uterus). This causes a shortage of oxygen and nutrients to the fetus.
- Toxic byproducts are produced when the body processes alcohol. These can then concentrate in the baby's brain cells and cause damage.

Damage from alcohol can happen at any point during pregnancy. The beginning of fetal development is the most important for the whole body, but organs like the brain continue to develop throughout pregnancy. It's impossible to exactly pinpoint all of the development during pregnancy, making it risky to drink alcohol at any time prior to birth.

It's also recommended that you avoid beverages containing alcohol when you're trying to become pregnant. Many people don't know they're pregnant for the first few weeks of pregnancy (four to six weeks). This is because it takes time for your body to build up enough hCG (human chorionic gonadotropin, a hormone that develops in early pregnancy) to be detected on a pregnancy test. During those early weeks of pregnancy, the fetus is going through a massive surge of development. Alcohol use during this time could negatively impact the baby.

### **How much alcohol causes fetal alcohol syndrome?**

Any amount of alcohol during pregnancy can cause fetal alcohol syndrome. There's no safe amount that can be consumed. Damage to your developing baby can happen at any point during pregnancy. Even having a drink at the very beginning isn't safe. All alcohol, including beer, wine, ciders and hard liquor can all cause FAS.

### **What are the symptoms of FASD?**

The signs and symptoms of fetal alcohol syndrome can vary. One person might have only a few, while another person could experience all of them. FAS includes mental and physical challenges. An individual with FAS may have noticeable changes to their face and limbs, as well as delays in the way their body develops over time. There can also be mental and emotional challenges throughout the person's life that can impact their social life, education and work.

### ***Infants***

Symptoms that infants with fetal alcohol syndrome could experience include:

- Abnormal facial features, including a smooth ridge between the nose and upper lip, a thin upper lip, and small eyes.
- Low body weight.
- Short height.
- Sleep and sucking difficulties.
- Small head size.
- Vision or hearing problems.

### ***Early childhood and beyond***

Symptoms that may develop over time in people with fetal alcohol syndrome include:

- Delayed speech and language development.
- Difficulty concentrating and short attention span.
- Difficulty telling the difference between reality and fantasy.
- Hyperactivity.

- Learning disabilities.
- Low IQ.
- Poor coordination.
- Poor reasoning and judgment skills.
- Poor school performance.
- Poor short-term memory.

### **What can be done?**

**Parenting any child is both challenging and rewarding.** Every child with FASD has their own special set of strengths as well as their own challenges. Too often people focus on the child's disability instead of appreciating the whole person. It is important that parents of a child with FASD learn about the disability, and get support for managing their child's brain differences. One significant way to help is by providing a stable, nurturing environment.

As parents and caregivers, we expect children to learn and behave in certain ways based on their age. Children and youth with FASD are often at a younger age of development in a number of areas than others their age. If we can adjust our expectations and "think younger" for a child with FASD, it may help to reduce frustration on all sides and improve outcomes.

It is also important to remember that people with FASD may have had more harmful childhood experiences than those without FASD (such as being exposed to domestic violence or abuse).

One well known study found that the impact of having FASD can be reduced by:

- having a diagnosis before age 6
- being in a stable, nurturing home
- using special needs services
- having basic needs met
- having no experience of violence against themselves

### **Building on strengths and tackling challenges**

It is very helpful to identify the strengths and talents in children with FASD while working to improve the areas of difficulty. A good starting place is to use the information in the diagnostic assessment. If you focus on strengths, it will help others see and appreciate your child as a whole person, as well as improve your child's self-esteem.

1. Start by identifying your child's strengths, talents and potential interests. Begin to include these in everyday tasks. Examples include: raking the lawn, shoveling snow, looking up directions on the computer.
2. Use words that are positive and strength-based when thinking about solutions or working with your child.
  - a. What does my child do well?
  - b. Saying "I believe in you."

- c. How can I support my child when they are struggling?
3. Help your child discover what they are able to do. Encourage your child to take part in everyday activities.
  4. Think ahead to the challenges your child might face in an upcoming situation and plan ways to lessen these challenges (this is called anticipatory parenting).
  5. Identify what some of your child's specific challenges are, and work with your child as well as your care team to come up with solutions that work for your child.