Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder

Fact Sheet

What is Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder?

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, or FASD, is a term used to describe the range of permanent disabilities caused by prenatal exposure to alcohol. Prenatal exposure to alcohol is a leading cause of preventable birth defects. It is one of the top three known causes of developmental delay in children in Canada along with Spina Bifida and Down Syndrome. The greatest risks of FASD are associated with high levels of drinking, including binge drinking, or heavy drinking. Right now, there is no way of knowing how much alcohol is safe to drink during pregnancy. Less is better. None is best. FASD is a life-long condition.

There are four terms commonly used to describe FASD:

1. Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder (FASD)
2. Partial Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (pFAS)
3. Alcohol-Related Birth Defect (ARBD)
4. Alcohol-Related Neurodevelopmental Disorder (ARND)

How is it manifested?

Although there is great variability in the characteristics of children with FASD, three common traits include: **Growth Pattern**

- slowed growth
- small birth weight and head circumference
- small in stature

**Distinct facial features**

- thin upper lip
- smooth philtrum (groove between upper lip and nose)
- small eye openings
- flat mid-face

**Central nervous system deficits**

- learning disabilities
- developmental delays
- inappropriate social skills
- difficulty learning from consequences
- hyperactivity
- poor concentration
- memory problems
- difficulty following instructions
Children may have problems in all three areas, or just one, depending on how they are affected. Often children will have normal growth and facial features, but display central nervous system deficits.

Who is affected?

The exact number of children born with FASD is unknown. FASD affects approximately 1% of people living in Canada.

How is it diagnosed or detected?

The criteria for the diagnosis of FASD are based on the presence of the following:

- evidence of excessive maternal drinking during pregnancy
- characteristic facial dysmorphology (e.g., microcephaly, poorly-developed philtrum, thin upper lip and flattened maxillary area)
- pre- and/or postnatal growth delays (weight, length and/or height below the 10th percentile)
- central nervous system (CNS) damage (e.g., signs of neurological abnormality, developmental delay, intellectual impairment, or neurobehavioural anomalies).

Additional Resources:

**Motherisk: The Hospital For Sick Children** - [www.motherisk.org](http://www.motherisk.org)  
Motherisk is dedicated to providing information and guidance to pregnant or lactating patients and their health care providers regarding the fetal risks associated with drug, chemical, infection, disease and radiation exposure(s) during pregnancy.  

**Breaking the Cycle** - [www.breakingthecycle.ca](http://www.breakingthecycle.ca)  
Breaking the Cycle is a unique early identification and prevention program for pregnant and/or parenting women who are using substances, and for their young children. The program was created with a holistic approach in mind, to serve women and children living in high-risk circumstances that, in addition to substance use, include homelessness, violence, poverty, poor health and nutrition, and chaotic and unstable environments.  

**Public Health Agency of Canada** - [www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/fasd-etcaf/publications_e.html](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/fasd-etcaf/publications_e.html)  
The Public Health Agency of Canada offers a variety of resources including an information booklet, national reports, and studies on FASD. FAS/E Information Service Toll-free in Canada, 1-800-559-4514 Provides links to support groups, prevention projects, resource centres, and experts on FASD.  

**Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA)** - [www.ccsa.ca](http://www.ccsa.ca)  
The CCSA is Canada’s national addictions agency. Its mission is to provide objective, evidence-based information and advice that will help reduce the health, social and economic harm associated with substance abuse and addictions.  

**Best Start: Ontario’s Maternal, Newborn and Early Child Development Resource Centre** - [www.beststart.org](http://www.beststart.org)  
Best Start is a provincial resource centre that seeks to enhance the capacity of service providers to implement effective health promotion programs for expectant and new parents (including both mom and dad), newborns and young children.

Books and Literature:
ConnectABILITY
Resources for people with a developmental disability and their support networks
http://connectability.ca

Living with FASD: A Guide for Parents By Sara Graefe
Living with Prenatal Drug Exposure By Lisa Cowan, Jennifer Lee and Emilie Cameron

The content contained in this document is for general information purposes. It is not the intention to diagnose or treat a child.