WHAT IS FETAL ALCOHOL SPECTRUM DISORDERS (FASDS)?

FASDs refer to the whole range of effects that can happen to a person whose mother drank alcohol during pregnancy. These conditions can affect each person in different ways and can range from mild to severe.

No two children with FASD are exactly alike, either behaviourally or physically. Some of the characteristics may include:

Abnormal facial features, such as a smooth ridge between the nose and upper lip (this ridge is called the philtrum)

- Small head size
- Shorter-than-average height
- Low body weight
- Poor coordination
- Hyperactive behavior
- Difficulty with attention
- Poor memory
- Difficulty in school (especially with maths)
- Learning disabilities
- Speech and language delays
- Intellectual disability or low IQ
- Poor reasoning and judgment skills
- Sleep and sucking problems as a baby
- Vision or hearing problems
- Problems with the heart, kidneys, or bones
- Immature behaviour, aggressive behaviour
- Appears unmotivated
- Poor sense of self

SKILLS & QUALITIES

One of the important things to remember is that people diagnosed with FASD will also have strengths so it is important to find out what the person does well and have them do that, regardless of their behaviour.

Some common skill areas include:

- Trusting
- Caring
- Friendly
- Persistent
- Musical
- Artistic
- Articulate
- Creative
- Great with their hands

FETAL ALCOHOL SYNDROME (FAS)

FAS is one of the group of conditions, and other conditions within this range are:

- Alcohol-related birth defects (ARBDs)
- Partial fetal alcohol syndrome (pFAS)
- Alcohol-related neuro-developmental disorder (ARND)

Not every mother who drinks heavily in pregnancy has a baby with FAS. So there seem to be other factors that make it more likely to happen. These may include:

- The genetic ‘makeup’ of the mother and baby.
- How healthy the mother is.
- How good the mother’s diet is.
• Whether the mother is stressed.
• The mother’s age.
• Whether the mother smokes or not.

HOW DOES FETAL ALCOHOL SYNDROME OCCUR?
A baby in the womb (fetus) gets all its nourishment from its mother’s bloodstream. Alcohol in the mother’s blood can pass through the placenta to the baby’s blood. So if a pregnant mother drinks alcohol, it also passes through the baby. Alcohol is a toxic substance, so it can poison the developing fetus. In the nine months in the womb, the baby develops and forms. Poisons in the blood can damage the baby. The damage depends on which part is developing at that time. The brain is continually forming, so it can be damaged at any stage of pregnancy. In the first three months, the organs are developing. So, this is the time when the heart, eyes, and kidneys might be harmed. Later, when the fetus is growing fast, alcohol can slow this down.

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT?
There is no particular treatment. Babies with FAS and FASD will have the problems for the rest of their lives. However, if the condition is picked up early, they will suffer the effects less. Research shows that people who have FAS or FASD go on to experience “secondary disabilities” – those not present at birth – which could be prevented with appropriate support. These include mental health and alcohol and drug problems.

GPs can refer children with FAS and FASD to community paediatricians who are likely to investigate problems further with psychologists, psychiatrists, speech and language therapists and specialists for organ defects.

WHAT IS THE OUTLOOK (PROGNOSIS)?
Getting the diagnosis of FASDs right is good for the child. If it is known what is wrong with them, they can be helped. If the diagnosis is made early, they will always get special help. They will have fewer problems if they are in a loving and understanding family.

They can have extra help at school. Social workers can help children and adults with FAS. All the extra help and understanding will make them less likely to get into trouble.

If you have a child with FASDs, support groups have information about how you can help them. With the right help they will do better in school. They will run into less trouble as adults.

HOW CAN FASDS BE PREVENTED?
National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines in the UK advise that if you are pregnant, do not drink at all if possible. This is especially important in the first three months. This is because you could get pregnant and not know for up to 4 to 6 weeks. If you do drink when pregnant, have no more than 1-2 units of alcohol. Do not drink alcohol more than 1-2 times a week. This will make the risk of your baby having a FASD less.

If you are drinking alcohol during pregnancy, it is never too late to stop. Because brain growth takes place throughout pregnancy, the sooner a woman stops drinking, the safer it will be for her and her baby.

Remember, the safest option is not to drink alcohol at all when pregnant.

FURTHER HELP & INFORMATION
FAS Aware UK
www.patient.info/support/fas-aware-uk
FASD Trust
www.patient.info/support/fasd-trust
NOFAS-UK
www.patient.info/support/nofas-uk

Sources: www.fasdnetwork.org
www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/fasd/facts.html

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