

# The effects of alcohol or other substances if used in pregnancy - FASD explained



## 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.

Cigarettes and recreational drugs and using substances such as cocaine are also teratogens. Cigarette smoking is associated with fetal growth restriction, premature birth and miscarriage. It also affects the fetus's sensitive lung tissue and brain. Using substances such as cocaine, methamphetamines, heroin and marijuana during pregnancy can cause low birth weight, heart problems and neonatal abstinence syndrome (this is when a baby goes through drug withdrawal after birth). Sharing needles can also cause infection.

## 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.

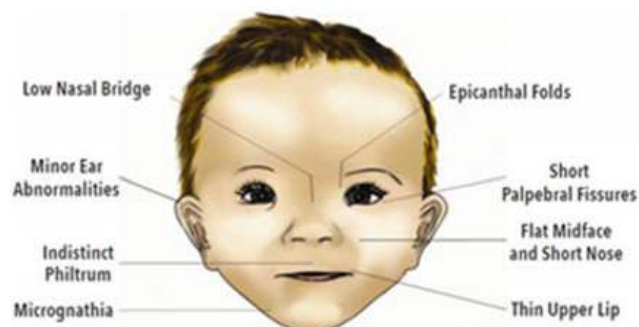
Drinking in pregnancy can lead to long-term harm to the baby, with the more consumed the greater the risk. Other risk factors include:

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

As many pregnancies are unplanned or someone might not know they are pregnant during the first weeks, the advice is not to panic, but to remain alcohol free for the rest of the pregnancy. Support and guidance can be found from a GP or midwife for anyone concerned.

## 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. It is estimated that 1 in 13 babies from an alcohol exposed pregnancy will be born with some of the characteristics overleaf (Greater Manchester Alcohol Exposed Pregnancies Programme).



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

The effects of pre-natal alcohol are known to have lifelong consequences, though the impact this has on adolescents and adults is less well understood. Although some effects of FASD can improve over time, it is common for secondary disabilities to develop as a result of other problems.

A study looked at a range of adverse life outcomes in the United States among people with FASD, these included:

- a high percentage suffered from mental health issues such as ADHD, clinical depression, or other mental illness.
- 60% had been suspended or expelled from school or had dropped out.
- 60% had been in trouble with the law.
- 35% had experienced alcohol or drug abuse or dependency.
- 50% had experienced inpatient psychiatric care, inpatient alcohol or drug dependency care, or had been imprisoned for a crime.
- 49% had exhibited inappropriate sexual behaviour on repeated occasions.

Two additional secondary disabilities exist for adults:

- 80% live in a group home, with family or friends, or some sort of assisted living.
- 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 FASD 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 [nationalfasd.org.uk/](http://nationalfasd.org.uk/). For specialist advice and support, email [info@nationalfasd.org.uk](mailto:info@nationalfasd.org.uk) 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/)

Campaign to help parents go alcohol free [drymester.org.uk](http://drymester.org.uk)

My FASD and Me (Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder resource) [fasd.me/](http://fasd.me/)

NICE Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders: [nice.org.uk/guidance/qs204](http://nice.org.uk/guidance/qs204)

### 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/media/5fd0b15ce90e0756207476c3/Maternity\\_high\\_impact\\_area\\_4\\_Reducing\\_the\\_incidence\\_of\\_harms\\_caused\\_by\\_alcohol\\_in\\_pregnancy.pdf](http://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5fd0b15ce90e0756207476c3/Maternity_high_impact_area_4_Reducing_the_incidence_of_harms_caused_by_alcohol_in_pregnancy.pdf)