

FAS: Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Overview

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) is the leading known cause of mental retardation and birth defects, and can occur when a woman regularly drinks alcohol during her pregnancy. It is 100% preventable if women abstain from alcohol while pregnant and while there is any chance they may become pregnant.

Babies born with FAS, which account for 1 out of every 500 births in the U.S., have many irreversible physical, mental and behavioral problems that affect every aspect of their lives and the lives of their families. These include the following:

- Abnormal facial features, including a small head, widely-set eyes, smooth, thin upper lip and general growth retardation.
- Impaired motor skills, hearing, speech and memory, and learning disabilities.
- Immature or inappropriate behavior, poor judgment and hyperactivity.
- Weakened immune systems, heart defects, epilepsy and cerebral palsy are possible.

Children exposed to alcohol during pregnancy who don't have all of the symptoms of FAS may have alcohol-related neurodevelopmental disabilities (ARND). These children often exhibit similar learning and behavioral problems as those with FAS. One out of 100 babies born in the U.S. has ARND.

When a woman drinks alcohol, so does her unborn baby. To make matters worse, research shows that the baby is most likely to be affected by alcohol in the first month or two, before many women even know they're pregnant. **For this reason, experts strongly recommend not only that women who are, or are trying to become pregnant abstain, but also that women not drink alcohol if they are sexually active and not using effective contraception.**

- The average point at which a woman discovers she is pregnant is 6 weeks.
- Any kind of alcohol appears to be equally damaging to a fetus, so a 12 oz. can of beer, a 4 oz. glass of wine, or a 1 oz. shot of straight liquor are all unsafe.

It is never too late to stop drinking during pregnancy! The sooner a woman stops, the less her baby is damaged.

- It is also important that she gets regular prenatal care, and tells her doctor that she was drinking. This is so the doctor can give her extra advice and support.
- Although there is no cure for FAS, early diagnosis enables children to receive services after birth that may increase their health and functioning.