

FACTS

WHAT IS FETAL ALCOHOL SYNDROME?

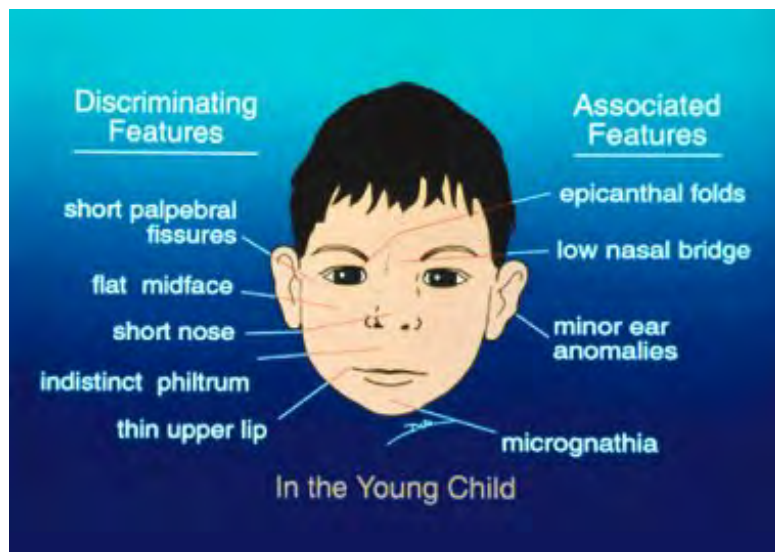
Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) is a pattern of mental and physical defects that can develop in a fetus in association with high levels of alcohol consumption during pregnancy. Alcohol crosses the placental barrier and can stunt fetal growth or weight, create distinctive facial stigmata, damage neurons and brain structures, which can result in intellectual disability and other psychological or behavioral problems, and also cause other physical damage. The main effect of FAS is permanent central nervous system damage, especially to the brain. Developing brain cells and structures can be malformed or have development interrupted by prenatal alcohol exposure; this can create an array of primary cognitive and functional disabilities. Alcohol exposure presents a risk of fetal brain damage at any point during a pregnancy, since brain development is ongoing throughout pregnancy.

When a pregnant woman drinks, the alcohol goes across the placenta to the fetus via the bloodstream. The fetus' liver isn't fully formed, so it cannot metabolize the alcohol quickly enough. At this stage, the baby has a high blood alcohol concentration. It therefore lacks oxygen and the nutrients needed for its brain and organs to grow properly. So when a mother drinks, it affects her baby's development.

Timing is another medical factor in the development of fetal alcohol syndrome. A baby's facial features are formed during weeks six to nine of pregnancy. Scientific evidence shows that mothers who drink during this three-week window are more likely to have babies with the facial deformities associated with FAS. Damage to the baby's organs through drinking is most likely to happen in the first three months.

Physical defects

Children with FAS have distinct facial features including: small and narrow eyes, a small head, a smooth area between the nose and the lips and a thin upper lip.



Physical defects may include:

- Distinctive facial features, including wide-set eyes, an exceptionally thin upper lip, a short, upturned nose, and a smooth skin surface between the nose and upper lip
- Deformities of joints, limbs and fingers
- Slow physical growth before and after birth
- Vision difficulties or hearing problems
- Small head circumference and brain size
- Heart defects and problems with kidneys and bones

Brain and central nervous system problems

Problems with the brain and central nervous system may include:

- Poor coordination or balance
- Intellectual disability, learning disorders and delayed development
- Poor memory
- Trouble with attention and with processing information
- Difficulty with reasoning and problem-solving
- Difficulty identifying consequences of choices
- Poor judgment skills
- Jitteriness or hyperactivity
- Rapidly changing moods

Social and behavioral issues

Problems in functioning, coping and interacting with others may include:

- Difficulty in school
- Trouble getting along with others
- Poor social skills
- Trouble adapting to change or switching from one task to another
- Problems with behavior and impulse control
- Poor concept of time
- Problems staying on task
- Difficulty planning or working toward a goal

Advice for mums-to-be

Drinking any kind of alcohol when you are pregnant can harm your baby, whether it is a 4-5 oz. glass of wine, a 12 oz. serving of beer or a 1½ oz. shot of distilled spirits (hard liquor) as all contain the same amount of alcohol.

The easiest way to prevent FASD is to abstain from all alcohol use during pregnancy.

If a woman never drinks alcohol during pregnancy, her baby will not have problems from prenatal alcohol exposure or FAS.

You don't have to be a heavy drinker to have a baby affected by alcohol.

If a pregnant woman drinks any alcohol, it passes directly from her bloodstream to the placenta of the growing baby.

Alcohol and Conception

If you are trying to conceive, please [stop drinking altogether](#). Ask your partner to help you by giving up drinking as well. If you are trying to conceive this is vital, as drinking impairs sperm count and heavy drinking can cause temporary impotence. Abstinence is the best policy.

Sources:

<http://kidshealth.org/parent/medical/brain/fas.html>

Google images