



## FETAL ALCOHOL SYNDROME (FAS)

### Definition

Fetal alcohol syndrome is a condition in a child that results from alcohol exposure during the mother's pregnancy. Fetal alcohol syndrome causes brain damage and growth problems. The problems caused by fetal alcohol syndrome vary from child to child, but defects caused by fetal alcohol syndrome are irreversible.

### Symptoms

The severity of fetal alcohol syndrome symptoms varies, with some children experiencing them to a far greater degree than others. Signs and symptoms of fetal alcohol syndrome may include any mix of physical defects, intellectual or cognitive disabilities, and problems functioning and coping with daily life.

### Physical defects

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

## **Causes**

When you're pregnant and drink alcohol:

- ✦ Alcohol enters your bloodstream and reaches your developing fetus by crossing the placenta
- ✦ Alcohol causes higher blood alcohol concentrations in your developing baby than in your body because a fetus metabolizes alcohol slower than an adult does
- ✦ Alcohol interferes with the delivery of oxygen and optimal nutrition to your baby's developing tissues and organs, including the brain

The more you drink while pregnant, the greater the risk to your unborn baby. Your baby's brain, heart and blood vessels begin to develop in the early weeks of pregnancy, before you may know you're pregnant.

Impairment of facial features, the heart and other organs, including the bones, and the central nervous system may occur as a result of drinking alcohol during the first trimester. That's when these parts of the fetus are in key stages of development. However, the risk is present at any time during pregnancy.

## **Risk factors**

The more alcohol you drink during pregnancy, the greater the chance of problems in your baby. There's no known safe amount of alcohol consumption during pregnancy.

You could put your baby at risk even before you realize you're pregnant. Don't drink alcohol if:

- ✦ You are pregnant
- ✦ You think you might be pregnant
- ✦ You're trying to become pregnant

## **Complications**

Problem behaviors not present at birth that can result from having fetal alcohol syndrome (secondary disabilities) may include:

- ✦ Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- ✦ Conduct disorder, which includes aggression, violation of rules and laws, and inappropriate social conduct
- ✦ Alcohol or drug misuse
- ✦ Mental health disorders, such as depression, anxiety or eating disorders
- ✦ Problems in school, with independent living and with employment
- ✦ Inappropriate sexual behaviors

## **Source:**

<http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/fetal-alcohol-syndrome/basics/definition/con-20021015>