

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome

Fetal alcohol syndrome is a developmental disorder that occurs when mothers drink alcohol while pregnant. Effects vary but include abnormal facial features, growth problems, and nervous system abnormalities, including mental deficiency. Even without the full syndrome, significant alcohol-related effects can be present. Completely avoiding alcohol during pregnancy avoids the risk of these birth defects.

What is fetal alcohol syndrome?

Fetal alcohol syndrome is a specific pattern of birth defects related to drinking alcohol while pregnant. These children often have a typical pattern of facial abnormalities, nervous system defects that may include reduced intelligence, and poor growth patterns. Other fetuses affected by the mother's drinking have *alcohol-related neurodevelopmental disorders*, with a similar but less severe pattern of abnormalities.

Children with fetal alcohol syndrome and fetal alcohol effects will likely have lifelong disabilities, requiring early intervention and special education. These effects are most likely in mothers who drank heavily during their pregnancy. However, they can also occur when there has been moderate or only occasional heavy drinking. There is no amount of alcohol that is "safe" to drink during pregnancy.

What does it look like?

The major features of fetal alcohol *syndrome* are abnormalities of the face and central nervous system and slowed or retarded growth:

- *Face.* A typical pattern of small eye openings, flat cheekbones, and an underdeveloped upper lip.
- *Nervous system.* Small head, reduced intelligence (sometimes fairly severe), or delays in normal development milestones.
- *Growth.* Low birth weight and/or slow growth after birth.
- *Other birth defects* may be present as well, such as heart defects and minor bone and joint abnormalities.

Children with fetal alcohol *effects* have a similar but usually less severe pattern of defects. They may not have significantly reduced intelligence but may have learning disabilities, including attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder, behavioral problems, or poor social skills. These conditions are termed alcohol-related neurodevelopmental disorders (previously called "fetal alcohol spectrum").

What causes fetal alcohol syndrome?

- Drinking alcohol while pregnant is the only cause.
- "Full-blown" fetal alcohol syndrome is more common with very heavy drinking during pregnancy. However, even moderate drinking can cause serious birth defects.

What are some possible consequences of fetal alcohol syndrome?

- Fetal alcohol syndrome causes lifelong disabilities. They may range from severe mental deficiency to relatively normal intelligence but with school and behavior problems. Later in life, children with alcohol-related birth defects are at increased risk of delinquency, alcohol and drug abuse, and mental health problems.
- Many other complications are possible, including serious medical conditions.

Can fetal alcohol syndrome be prevented?

- Not drinking during pregnancy completely eliminates the risk of fetal alcohol syndrome and related effects.
- Fetal alcohol syndrome can occur even with moderate drinking. *There is no amount of alcohol considered "safe" during pregnancy.*
- If you are already drinking during pregnancy, stopping now may reduce the risk of harming your baby.

How is fetal alcohol syndrome treated?

- The first step is diagnosis. Expert evaluation by a geneticist (a specialist in genetic diseases) or other expert is needed. Unfortunately, fetal alcohol syndrome and related disorders often go unrecognized. This is especially true of the milder abnormalities that occur in infants with alcohol-related neurodevelopmental disorders.
- Your child should receive a thorough evaluation, not just for diagnosis but also to help determine the best treatment plan. The goal will be to reduce the impact of your child's disabilities while making the most of his or her growth and development.
- In the case of other developmental abnormalities, education is probably the most important part of care:
 - *Early intervention* should start as soon as your child's alcohol-related abnormalities are diagnosed. Every

state has an early intervention program. Early intervention experts will assess your child and develop an Individualized Family Support Plan (IFSP), based on your child's development, need for support, and goals for independence.

- *Special education* services are also available in every state. You are entitled to evaluation and educational services for your child. Based on the results, an Individualized Education Program (IEP) can be developed to meet your child's educational needs.
- Professionals from many different areas may play a role in your child's care. For example, a psychologist, speech/

language pathologist, physical or occupational therapist, and/or social worker may be able to offer valuable help to your child and family.



When should I call your office?

Call our office if you have any questions about your child's testing, treatment, or educational intervention.

If you are pregnant or thinking of becoming pregnant and are having trouble controlling your drinking, call our office or your own doctor immediately. Getting help now may reduce the harmful effects of alcohol on your baby.

