



# Fetal Alcohol Syndrome

## What is fetal alcohol syndrome?



Fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) is a set of physical and mental birth defects that can occur in a baby when the mother drinks alcohol while she is pregnant.

While the effects of the alcohol may be short-lived for the mother, they can cause serious, life-long problems for the growing baby.

A baby with FAS can be born with mild to severe brain damage, facial deformities, and growth problems. Children with FAS may also have heart problems

and bone deformities.

Another challenge for a baby or child with FAS is behavioral problems, including problems with learning, paying attention, and problem solving.

FAS is the term given by doctors, but other names you may hear are Fetal Alcohol Effects (FAE) — which occurs when a baby has been affected by alcohol in the womb, but the condition is not as serious as FAS. Another term used is Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). This is used to describe all conditions that may be

caused by prenatal alcohol exposure.

It is estimated that more than 40,000 babies are born each year with some form of alcohol exposure. In fact, FAS is the leading cause of preventable mental retardation in the United States.

When a baby is born with FAS, the mother may be at risk of losing custody of the baby while it is determined whether she has an alcohol problem that needs to be treated. Some mothers have even been legally charged with physical abuse when their babies were born with FAS.

There is no cure for FAS, but it is *100% preventable by avoiding all alcohol during pregnancy.* Even if you think you are pregnant but don't know for sure, you should stay away from alcohol. No amount of alcohol is ever safe for a developing fetus.

### Ways to help your child:

#### ONE

If you are pregnant, stop drinking completely. There is no amount of alcohol that is safe for your baby. If you are drinking, be honest with your doctor and get the help you need.

#### TWO

If your baby or toddler has FAS, learning can be more difficult. Help your child by doing the following: offer choices and encourage decision making, teach daily self-help skills, create simple rules and routines your child can understand and expect, give advance warning before changing

#### Resources:

Call [Early Access](tel:1-888-IAKIDS1) at 1-888-IAKIDS1 if you have child development questions or concerns.

Link to an [Area Education Agency](#) in your region for more child and family information:

[www.iowaaea.org](http://www.iowaaea.org). Find a contact for your area under the [AEA Directory](#) tab.

For helpful and easy-to-understand information, visit the [National Organization of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome \(NOFAS\)](#).

The [Circle of Hope](#) is a group moms of kids with fetal alcohol syndrome can join to find extra support, resources and friendships.

Specialized healthcare for children special needs is available at the [Child Health Specialty Clinics](#) at the University of Iowa.

This factsheet is part of an informational series for parents of children ages 0-5, developed by the Iowa Department of Education Early Childhood Services Bureau. (Updated April 2010)

### Three important facts about fetal alcohol syndrome:

#### 1. FAS can affect anyone.

In fact, it is the leading cause of preventable birth defects and cognitive delays in the U.S. FAS can be easily prevented by not drinking any alcohol during pregnancy.

#### 2. A child will not outgrow FAS.

The physical and learning delays caused by FAS will stay with a person through their life, but the effects can be lessened

through early intervention.

#### 3. FAS can affect many aspects of a child's life.

These include physical and mental challenges, as well as the ability to learn. Children do best if they are diagnosed early and are seen often by a team of providers that can help develop a plan to best deal with the child's educational, emotional, and behavioral struggles.

to a different activity, and explain new things several times until your child understands.

#### THREE

When giving your child directions, use visual cues and point whenever possible. Simple gestures, or even music and rhymes may help your child remember what to do.

#### FOUR

Be patient with your child's emotional and behavioral struggles. If behaviors become too challenging, refer to the Resources above for assistance.