



Behavioral Health: Developing a Better Understanding

FETAL ALCOHOL SPECTRUM DISORDERS

What is FASD?

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders is an umbrella term used to describe the range of effects that can occur in an individual whose mother drank alcohol during pregnancy. Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) is the most commonly recognized of these disorders. The effects of these disorders may include physical, mental, behavioral and/or learning disabilities that can (and often do) have lifelong implications. Children exposed to alcohol during fetal development can suffer multiple effects. Nationally, FASD affects an estimated 40,000 infants each year - more than spina bifida, Down's syndrome, cystic fibrosis and sudden infant death syndrome combined.

A child born with an alcohol-related brain injury can suffer tremendous struggles with issues such as: learning, making friends, telling the truth, violence, appropriate sexual behavior, holding down a job, living independently and/or staying out of prison. Such children often go undiagnosed, leaving the adults and caregivers in their lives to misinterpret early behaviors and learning problems as those of a child who simply needs more discipline, more prescription drugs and/or more punishment.

Characteristics of FAS

Babies with FAS are abnormally small at birth and usually do not catch up on growth as they mature. They often have small eyes, a short or upturned nose and small flat cheeks. Their organs, especially the heart, may not form properly. Many babies with FAS also have a brain that is small and abnormally formed, and most have some degree of mental disability. Babies with FAS have significant central nervous system damage, often preventing the individual from living independently.

The effects of FAS last a lifetime. Even if not mentally retarded, adolescents and adults with FAS have varying degrees of psychological and behavioral problems.

Alcohol-related birth defects, such as brain defects, generally result from drinking during the first trimester, while growth problems are more likely to result from drinking during the third trimester. However, drinking at any stage of pregnancy can affect the child's brain development.

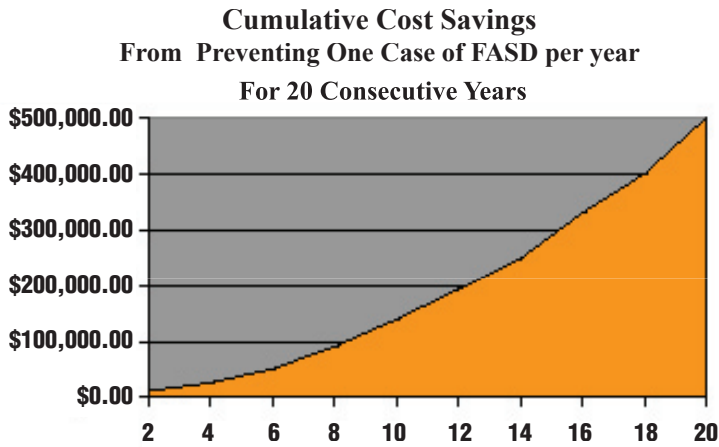
FASD Diagnosis and Treatment

It is extremely difficult to diagnose a fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. A team of professionals is needed which may include a pediatrician, psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, educational specialist, speech pathologist and physical or occupational therapist. Diagnostic tests may include: physical exams; intelligence tests; physical and occupational therapy; and psychological, neurological and speech evaluations.

The learning and life skills affected by prenatal exposure to alcohol vary greatly among individuals, depending on the amount of exposure, and the timing and pattern of exposure, as well as the individual's current or past environment. Services for individuals with FASD and their families vary according to what part of the brain and body have been affected, the age or level of maturation of the person, the health or functioning of the family, and the overall environment in which the individual is living.

What Do the Numbers Tell Us?

- FASD is 100% preventable - although there is no cure for FASD.
- An estimated 1,500 babies in Ohio are born with FASD each year.
- An estimated 111,800 Ohioans have FASD.
- FASD costs Ohio over \$290 million each year in medical, mental health, educational, foster care, unemployment and criminal justice services.
- Ohio will spend \$1.2 billion in support services to those with FASD over the next five years.
- FASD is the leading preventable cause of mental retardation in Ohio and the United States.



Difficulties for Individuals with FASD

Individuals with FASD experience difficulties in many areas of life. The problems identified below are not unique to FASD and may occur in conjunction with other disabilities:

- ◆ **Taking in information;**
- ◆ **Storing information;**
- ◆ **Recalling information when necessary; and**
- ◆ **Using information appropriately in a specific situation**

Individuals with FASD may appear to be oppositional by refusing to do something or simply not doing it, especially if given multiple tasks. They often do not follow through because they cannot remember what to do. Persons with FASD often recognize that there is something different about them and they do not want others to know, so they do not ask for help when they need it.

Younger people with FASD often go willingly with strangers, repeatedly break the rules, repeat mistakes and do not respond to reward systems to improve behaviors. They have difficulty with concepts of time and money and are often naive and give in to peer pressure. They have trouble maintaining good hygiene and function unevenly in school work and in development.

Sources:

Center for Disease Control and Prevention
 Double ARC - Toledo
 March of Dimes
 Ohio Department of Alcohol and Drug Addiction Services

The Facts

- ◆ **The sole cause of FASD is women drinking alcoholic beverages during pregnancy.**
- ◆ **Alcohol can damage a fetus at any stage of pregnancy. Damage can occur in the earliest weeks of pregnancy, even before a woman may know she is pregnant.**
- ◆ **Any alcohol consumed by a pregnant woman can be harmful to the fetus, regardless of the form it takes (beer, wine, liquor, etc.).**
- ◆ **There is no proven safe amount of alcohol use during pregnancy.**
- ◆ **Studies have found that binge drinking may be especially harmful to the fetus.**
- ◆ **The cognitive and behavioral problems resulting from prenatal alcohol exposure are lifelong.**

What Can Policy Makers, Local Officials, and Voters Do to Increase Awareness About FASD?

- ◆ **Promote** the message that: “If you are pregnant or planning to become pregnant - DON’T DRINK.”
- ◆ **Support** pregnant women who choose not to drink.
- ◆ **Encourage** women’s alcohol treatment programs to give priority to pregnant women.
- ◆ **Teach** young people about the dangers of drinking while pregnant as part of underage drinking prevention efforts.
- ◆ **Advocate** for increased funding for prevention, education and early identification, as well as family support for those affected by FASD.
- ◆ **Support** gender-specific treatment and other therapeutic interventions.

Ohio Department of Health
 Ohio Department of MR/DD
 SAMHSA
 University of Washington

