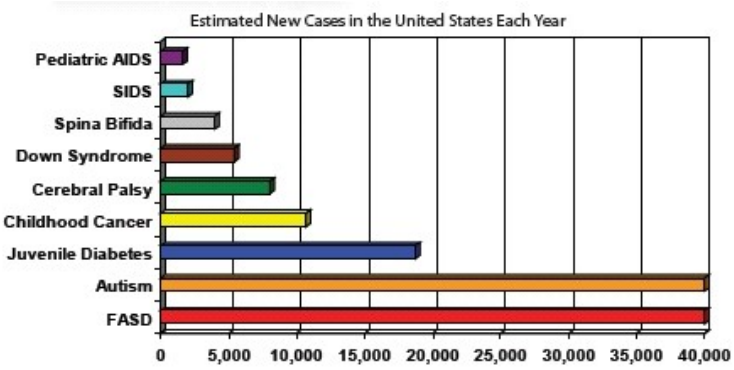
National Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome

Educating the public, professionals, and policymakers about alcohol use during pregnancy

FASD: What Everyone Should Know

Alcohol use during pregnancy is the leading known preventable cause of intellectual disabilities and birth defects in the United States.



Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD)

FASD is an umbrella term describing the range of effects that can occur in an individual whose mother drank alcohol during pregnancy. These effects may include physical, mental, behavioral, and/or learning disabilities with possible lifelong implications. The identifiable conditions associated with prenatal alcohol exposure under the FASD umbrella are Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS), Partial Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (PFAS), Alcohol-Related Neurodevelopmental Disorder (ARND) and Alcohol-Related Birth Defects (ARBD). An FAS diagnosis indicates impairments in three categories, 1) growth deficiency, 2) central nervous system dysfunction (developmental disability or brain damage) and, 3) a characteristic set of facial dysmorphology or malformation.

How Can FASD Be Preventable?

FASD is 100 percent preventable when pregnant women abstain from alcohol. If a woman drinks alcohol early in pregnancy she can help prevent FASD by abstaining from alcohol as soon as she finds out she is pregnant. NOFAS prevents FASD by raising public awareness, training practitioners, advocating for alcohol Screening and Brief Intervention (SBI) to be incorporated into the medical standards of care and clinical practice guidelines, and teaching youth to make healthy choices, among many other strategies.

"Of all the substances of abuse (including cocaine, heroin and marijuana), alcohol produces by far the most serious neurobehavioral effects in the fetus." *Institute of Medicine, 1996.*

What Are the Effects of FASD?

Depending on the timing and frequency of maternal alcohol consumption outcomes associated with prenatal alcohol exposure may include:

- Specific facial dysmorphology
- Growth deficits
- Brain damage including developmental disabilities
- Heart, lung, and kidney defects
- Hyperactivity and behavioral problems
- Attention and memory problems
- Poor coordination or motor skill delays
- Difficulty with judgment and reasoning
- Learning disabilities

Normal Brain FAS Affected Brain

Harwood, Am. J. Med, Genet. 2002

Who is at Risk?

Any pregnant woman is at risk of having a child with an FASD if she drinks alcohol during her pregnancy. Alcohol can harm an embryo or fetus at any time, even before a woman knows she is pregnant. Women who drink and don't use contraception and women who have an alcohol dependence or other alcohol use disorder are at an increased risk for having a child with an FASD. Women who have previously given birth to a child with an FASD and continue to drink are also at an increased risk of having additional children who are affected. Poor general health and lack of proper nutrition may also increase the harmful effects of prenatal alcohol exposure as could genetic factors that have yet been fully established.

Visit nofas.org to learn more.

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