

September 2016

## What is Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder?

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is a term used by doctors to diagnose mental and physical health problems someone might have as a result of their mother drinking during pregnancy.

The symptoms of FASD vary between people and can be mild to very severe. If there are no physical impairments, FASD may go undetected or misdiagnosed, which is why it's often only diagnosed later in life if at all.

Not being diagnosed with FASD and therefore not understanding the cause of a developmental or cognitive (brain) impairment may mean that a person doesn't receive the assistance that might help them manage it better. Over the person's lifespan the consequences of their impairment might increase, because in adulthood there tends to be less social tolerance for some behaviours than there is in childhood.

## What are the symptoms?

Someone suffering from FASD may have one or a number of the following conditions, which can affect them throughout their life.

### Brain and mental health problems

Brain development of the child can be disrupted due to their mother's alcohol consumption while pregnant, leading to a small or structurally abnormal brain.

This can cause the brain to function abnormally leading to a range of learning difficulties, including issues with memory, completing complex tasks and numeracy.<sup>1</sup>

These conditions may also contribute to the person developing attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), conduct and oppositional disorders, risk-taking, anxiety and depression.<sup>2</sup>

### Organ damage

Defects and abnormal function of the heart, kidneys, ears, eyes and other organs.<sup>2</sup>

### Face abnormalities

Facial abnormalities including a flat midface, short nose, indistinct philtrum (the vertical groove in the centre of the upper lip), thin upper lip, and a shortened chin.<sup>1</sup>

## How common is FASD in Australia?

The frequency of FASD in Australia is unknown, but it's believed to be significantly underreported, especially because not all people with FASD show the physical symptoms. A person or their parents might not know that they have FASD. However, the 2013 National Drug

Strategy Household Survey found that one-quarter (26%) of women continued to drink after knowledge of the pregnancy.<sup>3</sup>

## Further information

## References

1. Department of the House of Representatives. (2012)
2. National Organisation for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders. [PDF 560Kb].
3. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2014).  
. Canberra: AIHW.

See more at:

<http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au/fact-sheets/pregnancy-breastfeeding-and-alcohol>

<http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au/fact-sheets/pregnancy-breastfeeding-and-alcohol>

[http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/House\\_of\\_representatives\\_Committees?url=spla/fasd/report.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_representatives_Committees?url=spla/fasd/report.htm)

<http://www.aihw.gov.au/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=60129550296>

<http://www.nofasd.org.au/>

[http://kimberleyfasdresource.com.au/pdf/FASD\\_ResourceForTeachers.pdf](http://kimberleyfasdresource.com.au/pdf/FASD_ResourceForTeachers.pdf)

<http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au/fact-sheets/fetal-alcohol-spectrum-disorders-web-fact-sheet#sthash.G6a9FnA6.dpuf>