



# Recognizing Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)

## What is FASD?



Ethan, age 13

Alcohol exposure at any time during the pregnancy can result in Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD). FASD is a spectrum of disorders that can result in a range of disabilities. People with FASD can have lifelong physical, cognitive and neurobehavioral symptoms that vary in severity. **Unlike many medical disorders, FASD is 100% preventable.**

One category of FASD is Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS), which includes specific facial features, small growth, and brain function differences. However, the facial features are only affected when drinking occurs during the third week of the pregnancy, so only 9-10% of individuals with an FASD meet the criteria for FAS.

The vast majority of people with FASD have a “hidden” disability that presents as attention, behavioral, learning, or social problems. Too often their symptoms can be mistaken for something else, such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and they receive a diagnosis or treatment that is not correctly tailored to their specific disability.

## Why are We Concerned?

***Because FASD is more common than we think!***

According to U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC), an estimated 3.3 million sexually active reproductive age women *per month* are at risk for an alcohol-exposed pregnancy. **About half of pregnancies are unexpected and women who drink alcohol and don't realize they are pregnant may unintentionally expose their fetus.**



## How is Alcohol Different from Other Substances for a Fetus?

**Alcohol is the only substance of abuse that is a teratogen.** Teratogens can alter both the structure and function of developing fetal cells. Alcohol can cause damage at any time during the pregnancy and the impact on each fetus is highly variable and unpredictable. It can be influenced by the mother's or fetus's genetics, timing and dose of the alcohol, the mother's



nutrition status, her general health, age, stress level and any medications or other substances that she is taking at the same time.

## Recognizing FASD in All Ages

**FASD can be difficult to recognize because it can present in so many different ways.** Listed below are some common symptoms associated with FASD. However, these lists do not include all possible symptoms and there can be other reasons for the symptoms.



Emma, age 4

### What You Might See in Newborns and Infants:

- ◆ Jitteriness or tremors
- ◆ Unpredictable or fitful sleep/wake cycle
- ◆ Decreased vigorous body activity (low tone)
- ◆ Failure to thrive (given adequate opportunity)
- ◆ Weak sucking response or poor feeding
- ◆ Irritability
- ◆ Hyperexcitability

### What You Might See in Preschool Children:

- ◆ Hyperactivity or impulsivity
- ◆ Language development delays
- ◆ Motor/movement delays
- ◆ Poor hand-eye coordination and/or balance
- ◆ Difficulty with age-appropriate dressing or other fine motor issues
- ◆ Hearing, vision, joint, and oral/dental abnormalities are common

### What You Might See in Elementary School Children:

- ◆ Distractibility (can be sensory issue)
- ◆ Inattention (many kids get an ADHD diagnosis, but it's not 'typical' ADHD)
- ◆ Behavioral difficulties in school or home
- ◆ General difficulty with:
  - ◇ Change in routines
  - ◇ Inflexible approaches to problem solving
  - ◇ Organizational skills and task completion
- ◇ Short term visual & verbal memory
- ◆ Around 3rd-4th grade, increased difficulty with:
  - ◇ Peer relationships
  - ◇ Abstract ideas (math, time, and money)
  - ◇ Reading comprehension/writing



## What You Might See in Adolescents and Adults:

- ◆ Be aware that intelligence (IQ) can vary, *but they cannot access it reliably*
- ◆ Difficulty with judgment, decision-making, understanding consequences of actions
- ◆ Difficulty connecting to same-age peers, understanding verbal or nonverbal cues
- ◆ Common ‘adaptive living’ behavior problems:
  - ◇ School or work failure (due to “bad environmental match”)
  - ◇ Difficulty with self-direction, money management, and independent living skills

## What Should You Do if You Suspect Someone You Know Has an FASD?

If someone you know or love has a history of having had exposure to alcohol during the prenatal time period and you see symptoms such as the ones listed here (and especially if they are not responding to current therapies) consider seeking an FASD Diagnosis evaluation. The knowledge gained through this process can help them to access vital services and supports.

For more information about how to pursue a referral for a FASD diagnosis evaluation, contact FASDx Services.

### FASDx Services Contact Information

[www.fasdxservices.com](http://www.fasdxservices.com)

[fasdx@fasdxservices.com](mailto:fasdx@fasdxservices.com)

Phone: (907) 865-3279

Fax: (907) 865-7979

405 E Fireweed Lane, Ste 205

Anchorage, AK 99503

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