



# Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)

**Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) refers to a range of impairments that children are at risk of developing if exposed to alcohol before birth.**

## In this article

- An introduction to FASD
- Possible effects of FASD
- Management and treatment of FASD
- Prevention of FASD

## An introduction to FASD

During pregnancy, alcohol in the bloodstream crosses from the mother to the unborn baby via the placenta.

This affects the development of the baby's brain, organs and central nervous system and leads to physical, neurological, cognitive and behavioural impairments.

There is no safe limit on drinking alcohol during pregnancy or while breastfeeding. Physical abnormalities are linked to drinking alcohol during the first trimester, with damage to the brain and other organs possible at any stage. The risk increases with the amount and frequency of alcohol consumed.

FASD might not be obvious at birth and can be misdiagnosed or go undetected in the short or long term. It has been referred to as an 'invisible disability' for this reason.

FASD affects people differently and to varying degrees. In Australia, diagnosis falls into two categories, with the first describing the most severe form of the condition:

1. FASD with three sentinel features
2. FASD with less than three sentinel features

## Possible effects of FASD

The effects of FASD are life-long and can include some or all of the following symptoms:

- dysmorphic (sentinel) facial features (small, wide set eyes, a smooth groove between the upper lip and nose, and a thin upper lip)
- below average height, weight and head size
- seizures
- problems with fine and gross motor control
- learning difficulties
- poor memory
- poor problem solving skills
- hyperactivity
- poor attention
- stubbornness
- impulsivity
- poor social skills

If FASD is unmanaged, it can lead to the following secondary effects:

- difficulty accessing education and gaining employment
- substance abuse
- mental illness
- lack of independence
- interaction with the justice system.

## Management and treatment of FASD

While there is no cure for the symptoms, early diagnosis and intervention can eliminate or lessen many of the lifelong impacts of living with FASD.

A wide range of medical, therapeutic and educational support is available for children and adults with FASD and their carers. For example, health professionals such as developmental paediatricians, speech pathologists, occupational therapists and physiotherapists can help children reach their development potential.

There are also learning and behaviour strategies to help students and adults cope with the effects of FASD. Each person experiences FASD differently and will need tailored support to meet their needs and that of families and carers.

## Prevention of FASD

Fortunately FASD can be prevented altogether by not drinking alcohol during pregnancy. Greater awareness and support for women with alcohol-dependency can reduce the number of babies born with this life-long condition.

## References and further information

Department of Health – National Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) Strategic Action Plan 2018-2028

FASD Hub Australia – Australian Guide to Diagnosis of FASD

No FASD Australian – FASD Management, Intervention and Strategies

No FASD Australian – Characters across the lifespan

Parliament of Western Australia Education and Health Standing Committee – Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder: the invisible disability