

Pregnant Women: No Amount of Alcohol Is Safe

Pregnancy is a time that usually brings joy and hopeful anticipation. Consequently, most expectant mothers take significant precautions to help ensure that they deliver a healthy baby. One of those precautions—refraining from drinking alcohol—is particularly important, as research has clearly documented a correlation between alcohol consumption during pregnancy and birth defects.

No safe amount of alcohol

Fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) is the leading known cause of *preventable* mental retardation. FAS is not genetic or hereditary; it is caused by prenatal exposure to alcohol.

While it was once thought to be a condition only among women with alcohol problems, we now know that there is no *safe* amount of alcohol to drink during pregnancy. Drinking as little as one drink per day during pregnancy has been associated with decreased birth weights, spontaneous abortions and fetal alcohol effects. Nor is there a *safe* time during pregnancy to drink alcohol.

The bottom line: When a pregnant woman drinks alcohol, so does her unborn baby.

Defining fetal alcohol syndrome

Although FAS has received a great deal of attention in recent years, it is still misunderstood by most people. For example, one study of 18- to 44-year-olds found that the majority of respondents incorrectly assumed that FAS referred to babies born with an *addiction* to alcohol.

In reality, FAS is defined by the existence of any of the following conditions in children of mothers who drank *any* amount of alcohol on a regular basis during pregnancy:

- abnormal facial features
- growth deficiency before and after birth
- developmental delays (such as lack of coordination)
- behavioral problems (such as impulsiveness)
- intellectual impairment (such as attention, memory and learning problems)
- speech and hearing difficulties

A lifetime condition

Although many of the physical characteristics associated with FAS become less prominent after puberty, intellectual impairment endures and behavioral, emotional and social problems become more pronounced. FAS is a permanent condition; it lasts a lifetime.

Children born with FAS, their families, and the community-at-large face a challenging future. Persons with FAS suffer from a higher rate of psychological disorders and learning disabilities. Their families struggle to help them lead productive lives. Communities stretch to provide services and resources for them. For instance, newborns with prenatal alcohol exposure have hospital stays three times longer than those born to drug-free mothers. Persons with FAS often have a broad spectrum of needs as they get older, resulting from physical and mental health, academic, legal and occupational problems.

While an FAS child who receives early detection and intervention in the form of medical, educational and therapeutic assistance can make remarkable strides, the quality of his life is dramatically affected by his mother's decision to use alcohol during pregnancy.

Every expectant mother owes it to herself, her unborn child and society to abstain from drinking alcohol completely throughout her entire pregnancy. Women should not drink if they are pregnant, planning on becoming pregnant or could become pregnant (sexually active but not using an effective form of birth control).

There are many resources available to help address the issues associated with fetal alcohol syndrome. Your company's employee assistance program (EAP) can help a woman who is experiencing an alcohol problem obtain help to quit drinking so that she doesn't put an unborn child at risk for developing FAS. If a parent suspects her child may have FAS, there are many resources available for help with diagnosis, treatment, support and education.

There is no cure for FAS. However, FAS is 100 percent preventable. The best way to prevent the tragedy of FAS is complete abstinence from alcohol use during pregnancy. A child's life depends on it.

Resources

Damaged Angels: An Adoptive Mother Discovers the Terrible Cost of Alcohol in Pregnancy by Bonnie Buxton. Knopf Canada, 2004.

The Best I Can Be by Liz and Julie Kulp. Better Endings New Beginnings Books, 2000.

FAS: A Guide for Families and Communities by Ann Pytkowicz Streissguth. Paul H. Brooks Publishing Co., 1997.

National Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome
www.nofas.org

National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities
www.cdc.gov/ncbddd

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