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What is fetal alcohol syndrome?

Fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) is the term used for problems a child may have if you drink too much alcohol during pregnancy. These problems may be physical, mental, or behavioral.

Drinking alcohol during pregnancy also increases the risk of miscarriage.

How does it occur?

FAS can happen if you drink beer, wine, or hard liquor while you are pregnant. Any alcohol you drink goes into your bloodstream and then through the placenta and into the baby's bloodstream. The amount of alcohol in the baby's bloodstream is the same as the amount in your bloodstream. The alcohol can affect the baby's growth and development.

It is not clear how much alcohol puts the baby at risk. However, the more you drink during pregnancy, the greater the danger to the baby. Because we do not know what level of alcohol becomes dangerous, drinking no alcohol at all during pregnancy is the only sure way to avoid any risk of problems from alcohol. Drinking too much alcohol in the first trimester of pregnancy may cause most of the problems with organs developing, especially the nervous system.

What are the symptoms?

After birth, children who have FAS may have one or more of the following problems:

- mental retardation
- poor muscle coordination
- small size and slow growth
- thin upper lip
- cleft palate
- abnormal eyes, nose, face, limbs, joints, and fingers
- low-set ears
- very small head and brain (microcephaly)
- heart defects (ventricular septal defect--a hole in the part that separates the right and left ventricles of the heart--is most common)
- chronic middle ear infections
- hearing loss
- dental problems
- vision problems
- behavior problems such as hyperactivity, extreme nervousness, and poor attention span.



How is it diagnosed?

There is no reliable way to diagnose FAS before birth. If an ultrasound during pregnancy shows that the baby is small for its age, FAS is a possible cause.

To diagnose FAS, your child must have at least 1 of these 3 types of problems:

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- slowed growth (before or after birth)
- facial abnormalities, such as a flat shape of the face and nose, narrow eye slits, and upper lip and mouth deformities
- problems with the nervous system.

How is it treated?

There is no cure for FAS, but some problems may be helped with treatment. For example, heart problems can often be helped by surgery. Plastic surgery can help correct severe face deformities. For mental retardation and learning disabilities, special education classes in school can help.

How long will the effects last?

The effects of FAS last throughout life. A baby with FAS may be irritable, nervous, and very sensitive to sound and light, and may cry often. The problems change as the child grows up. Problems with aggressive behavior, mental illness, and substance abuse commonly begin in the teenage years.

How can I help prevent fetal alcohol syndrome?

No amount of alcohol has been proven to be absolutely safe for the unborn child. To give your baby a better chance to be born healthy, avoid alcohol throughout your pregnancy. Also, avoid drinking alcohol when you are trying to get pregnant.

For more information, contact:

National Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (NOFAS)

Phone: (202) 785-4585

Web site: <http://www.nofas.org/>.

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Published by [RelayHealth](#).

Last modified: 2007-03-19

Last reviewed: 2006-10-25

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