

EAP Educates: FAS - Foetal Alcohol Syndrome

According to scientific studies, South Africa has the highest reported incidence of FAS in the world.

In some areas up to 12.2% (122 babies in 1000) of babies are born with FAS – a problem of national proportions if compared to the statistic of 12% of adults with HIV/AIDS in South Africa

What is foetal alcohol syndrome (FAS)?

Foetal alcohol syndrome is the most common preventable cause of mental retardation worldwide. It is a syndrome that results in birth defects and is caused by consumption of alcohol by pregnant women.

Why does alcohol cause retardation in the foetus?

Alcohol and acetaldehyde (the chemical best known as the chemical that causes hangovers) are tissue toxins which may interfere directly with cellular growth and metabolism. When a pregnant woman consumes alcohol, it is carried to all organs and tissue including the placenta. The placenta functions to protect the baby and to ensure that nourishment is passed from the mother to the baby in order for it to grow. The problem is that alcohol is able to cross the placenta and therefore directly affects the cellular growth and metabolism of the baby. The placenta is not able to offer the baby any protection from alcohol, so both the mother AND the baby are affected.

What is Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)?

The degree of impact of alcohol on the baby varies widely and the maternal risk for giving birth to a child with FAS varies substantially both by population group and individual. As a result of this, there is a wide range of disorders known as Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) that is associated with alcohol inhibited growth. These disorders include structural anomalies, as well as behavioural and neurocognitive disabilities. Children at the severe end of the spectrum are defined as having FAS, Foetal Alcohol Syndrome.

What are the characteristics of a child with FAS and long term consequences?

Due to the impact alcohol has on the developing baby, children suffering from FAS may have some or all of the following characteristics; growth retardation, facial and neural abnormalities and malformations of other organ systems.

- FAS causes permanent brain damage – it is the largest cause of mental retardation in most industrial nations.
- Most FAS individuals will have mental health problems, as well as poor reasoning and time management skills and portray inappropriate and unpredictable behaviour. They are socially disabled for life.
- FAS children often fall out of the educational system and unemployment and poverty can be the longer-term results.

- All of the above issues can have a knock-on effect and can lead to problems with the law – from petty crime to murder and rape.
- Foetal Alcohol Syndrome also acts as a facilitator to STD's, AIDS, unwanted pregnancies, alcoholism and other substance abuse in the later stages of a FAS child's/adult's life.
- FAS is found amongst all races and across all socio-economic groups.

How can FAS be prevented?

A frequently asked question is just how much alcohol can a person consume in order for this syndrome to manifest. There is no clear answer on this as it is dependent on many factors. It is dependent on the amount of alcohol consumed, how often, and where the baby is developmentally when the alcohol is consumed. Other factors such as age, genetic factors, multiple drug use and the nutritional status of the mother are relevant and may affect the impact that alcohol consumption has on the baby. The safe answer is this; if you are planning to conceive or are pregnant, you should abstain from consuming alcohol completely.

There is a direct relationship between the amount of alcohol consumed during pregnancy and the extent of foetal alcohol related abnormalities in the baby. Also, it is important to realise that women are physiologically less capable than men to "hold" their alcohol. One binge drinking session during pregnancy could affect the baby as the toxins are passed through the placenta affecting development. There is also evidence to suggest that relatively light doses of alcohol can in some cases alter the child in ways that persist long after birth, particularly with regard to behaviour and intellectual functioning.

Many women with unplanned pregnancies are not aware of the pregnancy for the first 12 weeks. They can unknowingly damage their unborn child through alcohol consumption. The best advice for these mothers is to stop alcohol consumption as soon as you know you are pregnant. This reduces the risk of damage to the child.

The best method of prevention of FAS is to plan pregnancies with effective birth control and abstain from any alcohol when trying to fall pregnant and during pregnancy.

The good news is that FAS is 100% preventable. The bad news is that it is 100% irreversible

Source: Nutrition Information Centre University of Stellenbosch
FAS Facts.org

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON FAS PLEASE
CONTACT YOUR EAP FOR CONFIDENTIAL ASSISTANCE