

August 2023

International Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder Day 9 September: Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is FASD?

FASD stands for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. It is a range of disorders caused by alcohol exposure during pregnancy.

2. What is the difference between FASD and FAS?

FAS is Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, which is one form of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. It is the most visible form of FASD and the simplest to diagnose.

3. How is someone with FASD affected?

Someone with FASD can have growth restriction, so they are shorter and weigh less than their peers. They can have birth defects, including serious organ damage, and they can have cognitive delays and intellectual difficulties.

4. What is the impact of FASD on a person?

Due to the birth defects and disabilities, they may need medical help more often and may need to attend special schools. They can also have problems in school with paying attention and remembering information. They often have behavioural problem and struggle to form healthy relationships.

5. Can FASD be cured?

There is no cure for FASD, but with love and support it can be managed. Affected individuals may need support to become independent and may never be able to live on their own. With behavioural, educational, and medical intervention they can however reach their full potential. Some people with FASD may benefit from medication, but not all of them.

6. How is FASD diagnosed?

FASD cannot be diagnosed by just looking at a child, even if we know that the child was exposed to alcohol. To diagnose a child with FASD, a person needs to be evaluated by a multidisciplinary team which includes a doctor, someone who can perform psychological tests (such as a psychometrist or psychologist) and someone who can have an interview with their mother (such as a counsellor).

7. Can FASD be diagnosed at birth?

It is very difficult to diagnose a newborn child. They may be born small and underweight, they may struggle with feeding and sleeping as well. There may be other causes for this, and a diagnosis of FASD is easier to make when the child is older. One of the reasons for this is that the child has to be old enough to participate in the psychological testing. FARR tests children as young as 9 months of age.

8. How big is the problem of FASD in South Africa?

The World Health Organisation estimates that less than 1% of individuals are affected by FASD globally. It is however still seen as a major health concern. In South Africa it is estimated that our country's FASD prevalence is 11%. We have reported the highest prevalence rates worldwide, up to 28% in the Northern Cape and 31% in the Western Cape.

9. Can a father's drinking cause FASD?

No. A father's alcohol use before pregnancy can have a negative impact on the baby, but it cannot cause FASD. The negative impact can be, for example, on the growth (length) of the child.

10. Is there a safe amount of alcohol that you can drink during pregnancy?

No. Research has not established any safe limit of alcohol use, and therefore the most prudent choice is to abstain from alcohol for the whole 9 months of pregnancy. The message is therefore very clear: No amount of alcohol is safe during any time of pregnancy. As to those listeners who might be pregnant now, and who have used alcohol, the message is it is never too late to stop drinking during pregnancy. Immediately when you stop drinking, you prevent your unborn baby from any future potential prenatal alcohol harm.

11. Is there a time during pregnancy that it is safe to drink?

No. A fetus can be damaged by exposure to alcohol at any time during pregnancy. This is also why family planning is important as it is possible to expose your baby to alcohol before you even know you are pregnant. We need to keep in mind that up to 78% of pregnancies in South Africa are unplanned for various reasons. A woman might therefore not even know that she is at the beginning stages of her pregnancy. By just continuing with her normal alcohol consumption, she is unknowingly putting her unborn baby at risk of FASD. A woman does not have to be an alcoholic or a heavy drinker to get a child with FASD. Even small to moderate amounts of alcohol, any time during the pregnancy, can do harm.

12. What is government doing about FASD?

The South African government has implemented various programmes that have a positive influence on FASD. This includes the First 1000 Days programme of the Department of Health, substance abuse interventions run by the Department of Social Development, as well as the inclusive education and special needs education initiatives of the Department of Education. It is unfortunately not enough as individuals with FASD do not have access to required services and FASD is not seen as a health priority.

13. What are the consequences of FASD for an adult?

While children with FASD are sometimes able to access support through ECD centres and school, there are no support services for adults living with FASD. As soon as they leave school, they are on their own, especially if their families are not able to support them. They may struggle to hold down jobs as they struggle to follow instructions and adhere to rules. They may also be the victims of violence and crime. Unfortunately, adults with FASD may have conflict with the law, as they are easily manipulated by others, and they do not always understand the impact of their actions.

14. Are low-alcohol drinks safe?

As with the question regarding a safe amount of alcohol, we just do not know. Low alcohol drinks may still contain some alcohol and it is unclear if this may have an impact. The safest choice is therefore to avoid even low-alcohol drinks or drinks marketed as alcohol-free if they still contain some amount of alcohol.

15. What must I do if I am pregnant and use alcohol?

If you are pregnant and you use alcohol, it is never too late to stop. While the alcohol may have affected your foetus already, stopping alcohol use will prevent further damage from happening. Speak to your healthcare provider, and ask for support from your partner, family or friends who are close to you. It is never too late to stop.

16. Why is International FASD Day commemorated?

Refer to the information sheet provided.

17. The reporter might ask: What is your final message to the listeners?

Consider the following:

- Support to the pregnant woman by the father of the child, family and friends;
- Support at parties or events, to be the buddy who will have an alcohol-free night with a pregnant friend/family member;
- Sharing the FASD prevention message with family, friends and colleagues, not only on 9 September, but throughout the year.

18. Where can you contact you?

You are welcome to send an e-mail to info@farrsa.org.za or phone the FARR Head Office at 021-6862646. Leave your name and contact details and we will contact you.

You can also visit our website www.farrsa.org.za or visit our facebook and Instagram pages.

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