



The Arc Answers: Fetal alcohol syndrome

How many people have Fetal alcohol syndrome?

Approximately 40,000 babies are born with Fetal alcohol syndrome each year. Prevalence is estimated at 1 in every 1000 births, but it may be five to 10 times more, if alcohol-related neurodevelopmental disorders are included.

What are FASD, ARND, and ARBD?

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder: FASD is an umbrella term that describes a group of conditions that can occur in a person whose mother drank alcohol while she was pregnant. Unlike FAS, it is not a clinical diagnosis.

Alcohol-related neurodevelopmental disorder: ARND refers to mental and behavioral impairments related to FAS

Alcohol-related birth defects: ARBD refers to physical defects related to FAS

What causes FAS?

FAS is the most common preventable cause of birth defects. When a pregnant woman drinks alcohol, it is passed to her developing baby via the placenta. A toxic substance, alcohol can cause organ damage, behavioral changes, sleep disturbances, decreased attentiveness, slowed growth, intellectual disabilities, and developmental delays.

Is there a safe level of alcohol to drink during pregnancy?

No amount of alcohol consumption is known to be safe, but the more a woman drinks the greater the risk to the baby. It is recommended that women who discover that they are pregnant stop drinking. If they are unable to stop, they should contact their health care provider for help and resources.

What are the primary characteristics of FAS?

Children with FAS may have a variety and unique combination of symptoms. Common physical characteristics include: small stature, small openings for eyes, low nasal bridge, thin, smooth upper lip, and smooth skin between the upper lip and nose. These features can be subtle and hard to recognize.

Behavioral characteristics include: short attention span, hyperactivity, impulsivity, social skills deficits, disregard for authority, mood disorders, psychotic disorders, and deficits in understanding cause and effect.

What are common medical concerns?

Potential medical concerns, which should be assessed and monitored by a doctor, include heart, kidney and lung defects; vision and hearing problems; and deformities of joints, limbs, and fingers. In addition, people with FAS are at greater risk for developing a substance abuse problem.

What interventions have been proven helpful for people with Fetal alcohol syndrome?

Parents may be able to mitigate behavioral issues by establishing a daily routine, using concrete language and examples, teaching skills for daily living, and rewarding children to reinforce good behavior. In addition, individualized educational supports, vocational training, and social skills training may be helpful. As symptoms and abilities can vary, each person should be assessed individually to determine the best combination of interventions.

Where can I find other resources?

Centers for Disease Control & Prevention: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/fasd/index.html>

Fetal Alcohol Disorders Society: <http://www.faslink.org>

Mayo Clinic: <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/fetal-alcohol-syndrome/DS00184>

National Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome: <http://www.nofas.org/>

Nemours Foundation (Spanish): http://kidshealth.org/parent/en_espanol/embarazo/fas_esp.html

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