

# Learning the Basics About Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)

August 2018

# Learning objectives

- ▶ What is FASD?
- ▶ How does it happen?
- ▶ Characteristics
- ▶ How to prevent it?
- ▶ Where to get help?

# Putting it into context

- ▶ Alcohol remains the substance with the highest prevalence of use by Canadian students in grades 7 to 12
- ▶ On average, students try their first alcoholic beverage at 13.4 years of age
- ▶ Just under one quarter of students report high risk drinking behaviour (i.e., five or more drinks on one occasion)

# What is FASD?

- ▶ FASD stands for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder
- ▶ FASD is a brain injury that can occur when a fetus is exposed to alcohol. It's a lifelong disorder that affects the whole body including physical, mental, behavioural and learning disabilities. These can vary from mild to severe

# What causes FASD?

Alcohol is a substance that causes malformations of an embryo or fetus

As alcohol easily crosses the placenta, the fetus is exposed prenatally to alcohol

This may interfere with the overall development of the fetus resulting in damage to the brain and other organs

# ALCOHOL AND PREGNANCY

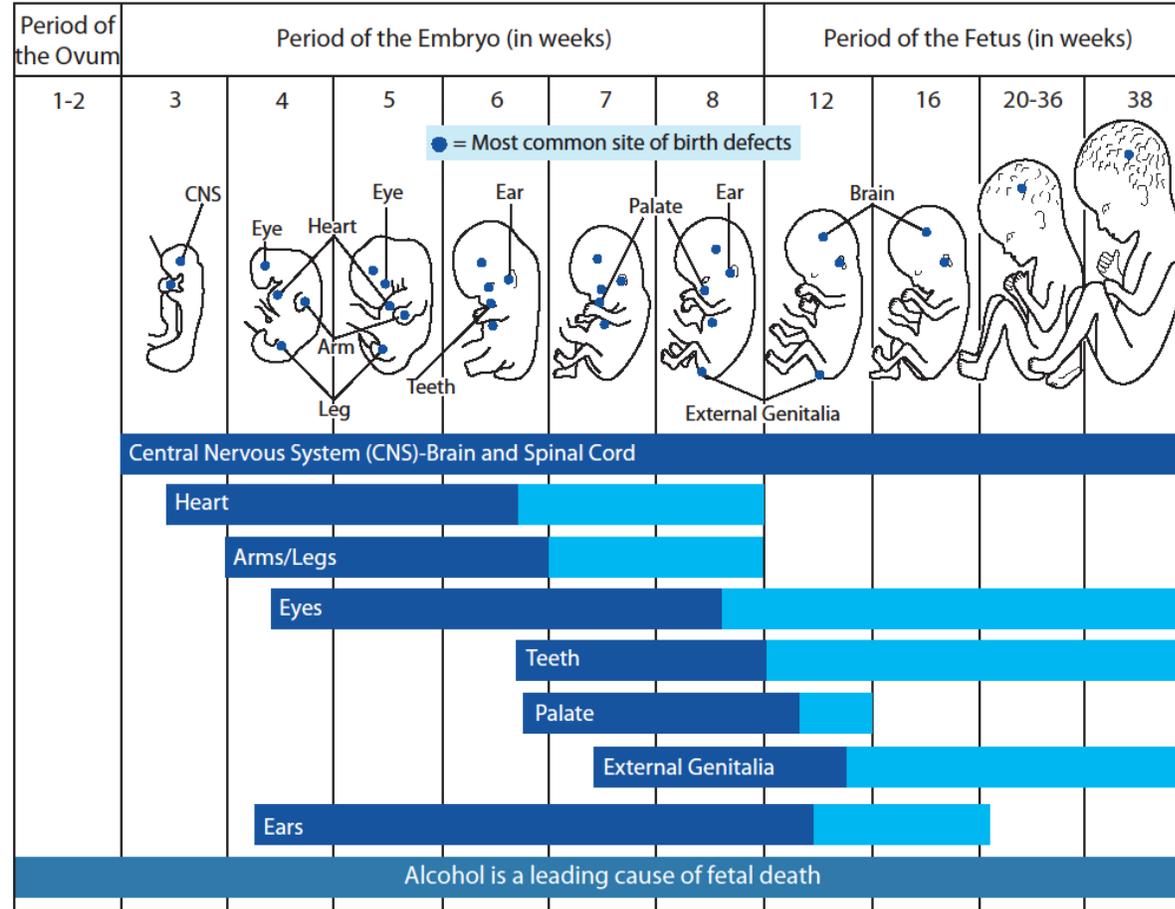
**NO SAFE Time.**

**NO SAFE Amount.**

**NO SAFE Alcohol.**

**PERIOD.**

## Your Baby in Weeks



Adopted from: Jacobson, S. Assessing the impact of maternal drinking during and after pregnancy. *Alcohol Health & Research World*, 21(3), 1997.

The chart shows your developing baby's vulnerability to alcohol-related defects during specific periods of development. The dark blue segments represent the most sensitive periods.



National Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome  
800 66 NOFAS | [www.nofas.org](http://www.nofas.org)

# Changes to the brain

- ▶ Prenatal alcohol exposure causes changes to the developing brain at neurochemical and structural levels. The brain injury is widespread and impacts numerous areas
- ▶ This brain injury cannot be cured
- ▶ Most people with FASD have no outward physical signs



# Changes to the brain

There will be different degrees of brain damage for all individuals with FASD. Signs of this may include problems with:

- ▶ learning
- ▶ memory
- ▶ attention
- ▶ language
- ▶ social skills
- ▶ motor skills
- ▶ behaviour control
- ▶ reasoning and judgement
- ▶ academics like math and reading

# In every day life, problems with behaviours may look like...

- ▶ Being unfocused and easily distracted
- ▶ Having difficulties with keeping up with classroom learning
- ▶ Having a hard time handling money or learning the concept of time



# In every day life, problems with behaviours may look like...

- ▶ Being impulsive
- ▶ Not understanding consequences
- ▶ Acting out from frustration
- ▶ Forgetting how to do something they've done before



# Changes to the face

Only a small number of people with FASD have characteristic facial features. These features only happen if a fetus was exposed to alcohol at a particular stage of pregnancy

Features include:

- ▶ Thin upper lip
- ▶ Little or no groove or ridge between the nose and upper lip
- ▶ Small eyes or shorter distance between one corner of the eye to the other

# Changes to the body

- ▶ Someone with FASD may have other health conditions as there are more than 400 associated with FASD
- ▶ FASD can affect almost all areas of the body such as vision, kidneys, hearing, heart, bones etc

# The impact of alcohol

The impact of alcohol on the fetus may be influenced by the amount of alcohol, how often alcohol was consumed, and at what stage during the pregnancy the alcohol was used

The impact of alcohol on the fetus may be affected by the maternal stress level, age, nutrition, smoking or drug use during pregnancy

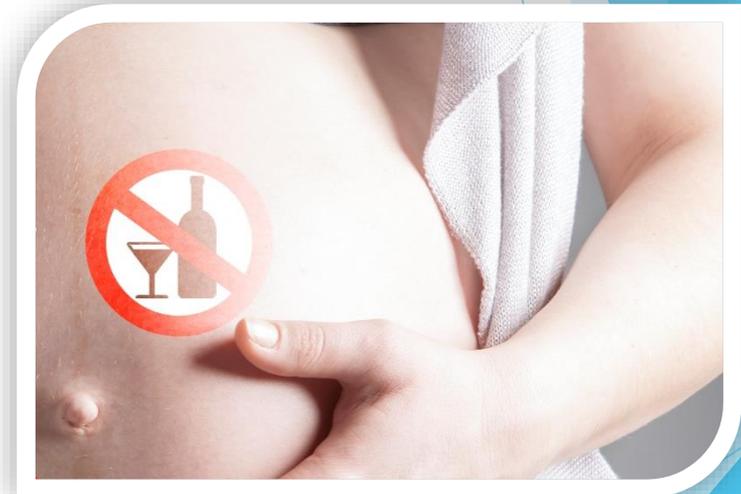
Each fetus will be affected by alcohol differently. It is unknown why prenatal alcohol exposure affects each fetus differently

# Alcohol and pregnancy

There is:

- ▶ no safe TIME to drink alcohol during pregnancy
- ▶ no safe KIND of alcohol to drink during pregnancy
- ▶ no safe AMOUNT of alcohol to drink during pregnancy

Therefore it is safest not to drink during pregnancy



# Reasons why someone may drink alcohol

Alcohol is used for a variety of reasons. However alcohol may be used as a way to cope with:

- ▶ Depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- ▶ Feelings of being powerless
- ▶ Low self-esteem
- ▶ Pain and illness
- ▶ Stressful life events
- ▶ Body image and sexual difficulties
- ▶ All kinds of abuse (physical, emotional, sexual)

# Reasons why someone may drink alcohol during pregnancy

- ▶ They don't know they are pregnant. In fact, up to 61% of pregnancies are unplanned
- ▶ They are unaware of the extent of damage alcohol can cause the fetus or they believe that their pattern of use is safe
- ▶ They underestimate the harm drinking alcohol can cause because they know others who drank during their pregnancy and their children appear healthy
- ▶ Using alcohol is normal for their social group so not drinking may be difficult
- ▶ They may be using alcohol to cope with difficult situations such as violence, depression, poverty or isolation
- ▶ They may struggle with alcohol addiction

# Incidence of FASD

- ▶ FASD is the leading known preventable birth defect and the leading cause of developmental delays among Canadians
- ▶ The exact number of people who have FASD is unknown as it is hard to diagnose and is often undetected. Current studies suggest that it is up to 4% of the population
- ▶ FASD is a life long condition, but with appropriate interventions and support people with FASD may be successful in many areas of their lives

# FASD is costly

- ▶ A person with FASD may have challenges that require expensive social services throughout their life
- ▶ It is estimated that the cost of FASD in Canada is approximately \$4 billion per year



# How to support someone with FASD

- ▶ Be educated about FASD
- ▶ Be understanding and inclusive
- ▶ Be a good role model and be a good friend
- ▶ Be patient
- ▶ Provide routine and repetition
- ▶ Offer gentle reminders
- ▶ Show the same respect that you would expect from someone



# Why learn about FASD?

- ▶ To encourage you to make healthy choices and avoid alcohol during pregnancy
- ▶ To help you and others to have planned, alcohol-free pregnancies
- ▶ To help you understand and include those around you who may be affected

# Where to get more information

[www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/fetal-alcohol-spectrum-disorder.html](http://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/fetal-alcohol-spectrum-disorder.html)

[www.alcoholfreepregnancy.ca](http://www.alcoholfreepregnancy.ca)

[www.fasdontario.ca](http://www.fasdontario.ca)

[www.canfasd.ca](http://www.canfasd.ca)

[www.fasdwaterlooregion.ca](http://www.fasdwaterlooregion.ca)

# Where to get help

- ▶ Talk to your doctor or nurse practitioner
- ▶ Umbrellas Program, Canadian Mental Health Association-Simcoe County 1-800-461-4319
- ▶ Canadian Mental Health Association-Muskoka Parry Sound 1-800-893-8333
- ▶ Bridges to Moms Program, Addiction Services for York Region 1-800-263-2288
- ▶ Motherisk 1-877-327-4636
- ▶ Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit 1-877-721-7520
- ▶ Chippewas of Rama 705-325-3611
- ▶ Barrie Native Friendship Centre 705-721-7689
- ▶ Anishinabek Nation 1-877-702-5200
- ▶ FASD Initiative for Simcoe County 1-877-803-3227 ext.3106