

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) Prevention

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ALCOHOL & WOMEN'S HEALTH - Public Information Sheet -- April 2005



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Women's Health Risks

Accelerated Harm—Studies of women alcoholics in treatment suggest they experience greater physiological impairment earlier in their drinking careers, despite having consumed less alcohol than men [1,2]. Female alcoholics have death rates 50 to 100 percent higher than those of male alcoholics. Furthermore, more female alcoholics die from suicides, alcohol-related accidents, circulatory disorders, and cirrhosis of the liver [3].

Liver Damage—Women develop alcoholic cirrhosis and hepatitis after a shorter period of heavy drinking and at lower levels of daily drinking than men [4,5].

Breast Cancer—The risk may increase when a woman consumes 1 ounce or more of absolute alcohol daily. Other studies do not concur with these findings; more research is needed regarding the relationship between drinking and breast cancer [6,7].

Menstrual and Reproductive Disorders—(e.g., painful menstruation, heavy flow, premenstrual discomfort, irregular or absent cycles) have been associated with chronic heavy drinking [8,9]. Chronic drinking may lead to early menopause [10].

Stillbirth and Miscarriage—Danish researchers determined that women who consumed five or more drinks per week were three times more likely to deliver a stillborn baby than women who had less than one drink a week. In the same study, researchers found that moderate amounts of alcohol can also increase the risk of miscarriage, especially during the first trimester [11].

Domestic Abuse—57% of female victims of nonfatal domestic violence reported that their assailant had been drinking [12].

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS)—is caused by women's alcohol use during pregnancy. It is the leading known cause of preventable birth defects and developmental disabilities in the United States. Children prenatally exposed to alcohol may be born with a range of brain and central nervous system defects. This

permanent organic brain damage results in life long learning, emotional, and behavioral disorders. Many more children are born with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), a condition where the child's disabilities do not meet the criteria for an FAS diagnosis. However the child presents a range of neurological disabilities resulting in lifelong social, emotional, learning, and behavioral problems [13].

The Trends

Women's Drinking—The most recent national and Minnesota data confirm that women are drinking more heavily, more often, and continue to drink during pregnancy. The Center for Disease Control findings indicate that the rate of frequent drinking among pregnant women increased fourfold between 1991 and 1995 [14].

- Nationally, 12.8% of the women reported drinking alcohol during pregnancy.
- One out of every 29 women who knew they were pregnant reported "risk drinking" (7 or more drinks per week, or 5 or more drinks on any one occasion).
- 1 in 8 women of childbearing age (18 to 44 yrs.) reported "risk drinking"; these alcohol levels can pose a threat to the fetus should a woman be pregnant and not know it.
- Minnesota women of childbearing age drank more frequently than women in nearly every other state.

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome—The most recent and accurate data collected by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Surveillance Network (FASSNet) shows that the rate of FAS in children born between 1995 and 1997 in 4 states (Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, New York) ranged from 0.3 to 1.5 per 1,000 live births. The highest rates were found among blacks and American Indian/Alaska Natives. However, all women who drink during pregnancy run the risk of having a child born with FAS or FASD [15]. In addition, there may be three times as many children born with FASD than FAS [16]. In 1981, the U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on Alcohol and Pregnancy first advised against drinking alcoholic beverages during pregnancy or when planning a pregnancy. This warning was later re-issued in 1990, 1995, and in February 2005 by the U.S. Secretary of Health.

The Costs of Alcohol Abuse

Health Care and Treatment—The Center for Substance Abuse Prevention estimated the annual direct and indirect cost of alcohol abuse to be \$98.6 billion [17].


Fetal Alcohol Syndrome—The 10th Special Report to the U.S. Congress on Alcohol and Health estimated the annual health care costs associated with FAS to be \$2.8 billion in 1998 [18].

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