

What you need to know about Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder

Key facts

- Drinking alcohol during pregnancy can damage the developing baby's brain, body and organs and lead to a lifelong disability known as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).
- FASD is the leading preventable, non-genetic developmental disability in Australia.
- If you are pregnant or planning a pregnancy, not drinking any alcohol will prevent FASD.
- People with FASD experience a range of physical, behavioural, and cognitive challenges throughout their lives.
- A person living with FASD has their own individual strengths and challenges. Having access to diagnosis, disability support, services, and early intervention results in better outcomes throughout their lives.

About Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)

FASD is a neurodevelopmental condition caused by a developing baby being exposed to alcohol during pregnancy. It is a lifelong disability.

People with FASD experience a range of physical, behavioural, and cognitive challenges such as:

- physical and emotional developmental delay
- impaired speech and language development
- learning problems, such as issues with memory and attention, and
- difficulty controlling behaviour.

Understanding FASD

Because it is a spectrum disorder, the experience of every individual with FASD is unique.

As with any disability, a person living with FASD has their own individual strengths and challenges. But all experience some degree of difficulty in everyday life and will likely need additional support with:

- motor skills
- learning
- attention
- social skills
- physical health
- memory
- communication
- emotional regulation.

The challenges experienced by people living with FASD may impact the quality of their lives, as well as the lives of their families.

People living with FASD can:

- Be impulsive or have challenges with understanding and learning from consequences.
- Have difficulty managing responses to sensory stimuli, which result in them becoming overwhelmed or distressed in busy environments.
- Have challenges with regulating their emotions, and need a caregiver or other adult to support them with this.
- Demonstrate delayed language development impacting their ability to communicate their thoughts or needs, and participate in conversations with family, peers, and other people.
- Find social interactions and activities difficult.

People with FASD may struggle with daily activities and environments – and this can create a barrier to them becoming independent. Someone with FASD will often require supervision and assistance for activities where other people of the same age do not.

Diagnosis of FASD

FASD is assessed and diagnosed by working to understand the complete picture of physical or developmental delay, neurological impairment, and the extent of alcohol exposure during pregnancy.

A diagnosis of FASD requires neurodevelopmental impairment in at least three of ten specified domains of central nervous system structure or function. These are outlined in the table below.

Brain structure / neurology	Overall brain size, structural brain changes, seizures, other neurological conditions with no known cause (e.g. visual impairment, hearing loss).
Motor skills	Includes both fine motor skills (i.e. tasks that involve the small muscles in the hands) and gross motor skills (i.e. tasks that involve big movements – balancing, coordination, running, jumping).
Cognition	General intelligence – includes verbal and nonverbal reasoning skills.
Language	Expressive (how a person uses words to express themselves) and receptive (how well someone understands) language abilities.
Academic achievement	Literacy (writing and written expression), reading or mathematics.
Memory	Includes verbal and visual memory
Attention	Attention deficits usually manifest as problems with concentration, task focus and work organisation.
Executive functioning, impulse control and hyperactivity	Executive functions refer to a set of higher-level skills involved in organising and controlling one's own thoughts and actions to fulfil goal-directed behaviour.
Affect regulation	Mood and anxiety disorders.
Adaptive functioning, social skills, and social communication	Adaptive behaviours are the life skills that enable an individual to live independently in a safe and socially responsible manner, and determine how well they cope with everyday tasks.

A timely diagnosis of FASD can make a big difference, and ensure a person gets the care and support they need to reach their full potential. A diagnosis also assists families and support networks in understanding FASD and the challenges it may present.

If you are worried your child might have FASD, discuss this with your healthcare provider. If you are looking for a FASD-informed healthcare provider, search the FASD Hub Services Directory to find providers near you: fasdhub.org.au/services

Talking about your alcohol use



If you have any questions about alcohol and pregnancy, or you need support to stop drinking, talk to your doctor, midwife, or obstetrician.

Health professionals speak to lots of people about alcohol. They can answer questions and provide information on services offering support and advice.

More information and support

- To learn more about alcohol, pregnancy, breastfeeding and FASD, visit: everymomentmatters.org.au
- If you need help to stop drinking, speak to a doctor. You can also find support, counselling and referrals at the National Alcohol and Other Drug Hotline on **1800 250 015** or drughelp.gov.au
- To learn more about Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) or find FASD-informed services, contact the FASD Hub at fasdhub.org.au or NOFASD at nofasd.org.au or **1800 860 613**
- For more information on the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) Alcohol Guidelines, visit: nhmrc.gov.au/alcohol



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Learn more about FARE at fare.org.au

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