

# Manitoba Addictions Awareness Week

## FAST FACTS ON FETAL ALCOHOL SPECTRUM DISORDER

### What is Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)?

**Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)** is the overall term currently used to describe the entire range of disabilities, birth defects, etc. associated with damages resulting from alcohol use by a mother during pregnancy. This range includes Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and partial Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS/pFAS), Alcohol Related Brain Disorder, Alcohol Related Neurological Disorder, etc. Partial Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (pFAS) was previously known as Fetal Alcohol Effects therefore **FAS/FAE = is now better defined by the terms FAS/pFAS.**

**Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) is:** A cluster of birth defects caused by consumption of alcohol during pregnancy.

- **The damage caused by fetal alcohol exposure is permanent.**
- FAS is preventable.
- FAS should be determined by a medical diagnosis.

### Features of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS)

- **Growth retardation** - Babies may grow at a slower than normal rate during pregnancy and after birth. Children are typically small and skinny, growing into short adults.
- **Appearance** - The FAS child has distinct facial features, these may include some or all of the following: shortened eye slits, flattened mid-face, a flattened midline ridge between the nose and lip, thin upper lip, and other features.
  - **Please note:** Facial features may fade as the child grows. Using facial features alone to identify FAS is not advised, as this can promote a stereotypical image of the FAS affected person.
- **Brain and central nervous system** - The most critical effect of alcohol on the fetus is the permanent damage to the brain and central nervous system. This can include:
  - Small brain and head circumference
  - Brain malformations
  - Developmental delay
  - Intellectual impairment
  - Behavioral disorders,
  - Learning disabilities
  - Attention Deficit Disorder
  - Hyperactivity.

### What is Partial Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (pFAS)?

**pFAS (Partial Fetal Alcohol Syndrome) previously referred to as FAE** : Refers to an individual who has been exposed to maternal drinking and has one or two FAS characteristics.

- Like FAS, pFAS is preventable.
- pFAS **is not** the less severe form of FAS.
- FAS and pFAS are known as the leading causes of birth defects and developmental delay in North American children.

### Features of Partial Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (pFAS)

- **Appearance** - A child with pFAS may look normal but still suffer damage to the brain and nervous system.
- **Behavior and learning** - The most critical effect of alcohol is permanent damage to the fetal brain and central nervous system. The learning and behavioral characteristics of FAS and pFAS are similar.
  - pFAS will show itself in the child as developmental delay, intellectual impairment, behavioral disorders, learning disabilities, attention deficit disorder and hyperactivity
  - Persons with pFAS may function far below their actual age in school and socially.
  - Poor judgement, learning difficulties, impulsive behavior and poor social and communications skills are common characteristics.

**Reference:** Information from *It Takes a Community Resource Manual* - Aboriginal Nurses Association of Canada & Health Canada

### Where is Information on FAS/pFAS available?

**FAS/E Resource Centre - 944-6321; Addictions Foundation of Manitoba Library – 1-866-638-2568; AFM website: [www.afm.mb.ca](http://www.afm.mb.ca); Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse Website - <http://www.ccsa.ca/fas/> visit this database for a list of current resources, terms and acronyms; NorthFASD Northern and rural MB discussion group/information source - <http://groups.google.com/group/northfasd> - Other sites and resources are listed in the drug awareness curriculum *Tough Kids and Substance Abuse* available at AFM Library.**

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### ***FAST FACTS ABOUT FETAL ALCOHOL SYNDROME/pfas***

- ◆ FAS is preventable.
- ◆ Drinking [alcohol] at any time during pregnancy may damage [fetal] brain tissue.
- ◆ The current recommendation in Canada and the U.S.A is to abstain from alcohol completely during pregnancy.
- ◆ 9 babies in every 1,000 born in Canada have FASD [Public Health Agency of Canada, 2005].
- ◆ As many as 240 children are born in Manitoba each year with FAS.
- ◆ FAS is now recognized as the number one known cause of mental handicap and birth disorders in North America.-  
Expressed fractionally: [FAS is the leading cause of birth defects]  
\*1/500 FAS \*1/600 DOWN'S SYNDROME \*1/700 SPINA BIFIDA
- ◆ Women who drink and have an unplanned pregnancy should quit drinking as soon as they suspect that they are pregnant.
- ◆ All women of childbearing age who consume alcohol are at risk of having a child with Alcohol Related Birth Defects.
- ◆ Women planning a pregnancy should receive the support of their partners, family, friends and community to stop drinking before conception and to not drink throughout pregnancy and breast-feeding.
- ◆ 77% of Canadian women of childbearing age report alcohol consumption and 25% of pregnant women report that they have consumed alcohol in the previous month.
- ◆ FAS is permanent and irreversible, and raises challenges at each developmental stage [continuing beyond puberty] of the affected children
- ◆ FAS is common, expensive, and preventable.
- ◆ Manitoba spends about \$1.5 million in support for a FAS child during their lifetime
- ◆ According to *FAS World Report* (Vol.1, No.1), individuals with FAS now alive in Canada will cost taxpayers approximately \$600 billion.
- ◆ Individuals with pFAS may look and seem normal; as a result this condition is often not diagnosed. Of individuals with pFAS between the ages of 12 and 51:
  - ⇒95% will have mental health problems.
  - ⇒68% will have disrupted school experiences.
  - ⇒68% will experience trouble with the law.
  - ⇒55% will be confined in prison, a drug or treatment centre or mental institution.