

FASD FACTS

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)

PREVALENCE IN OUR COMMUNITY

It is estimated that 5, 689 individuals are living with FASD in Dufferin and Wellington Counties. Of this, 1,381 are under 18 years of age.

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

Approximately, 1, 036 individuals under the age of 18 are living with Autism throughout Dufferin and Wellington Counties.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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What is FASD?

FASD stands for Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. FASD is a diagnostic term used to describe the range of disabilities that can happen when there is prenatal alcohol exposure.¹

How Common is FASD?

It is difficult to determine the prevalence (total number of people affected by FASD at a specific point in time) because there are no national statistics and limited research on the rates of FASD in Canada. Health Canada has estimated that nine in every 1, 000 babies are born with FASD.² This is likely a conservative estimate. In the United States, assessment of every child in grade one has found rates of FASD as high as 4.8%.³ It is likely that many people go through life without a diagnosis. Given this, experts conservatively predict that prevalence rates of FASD are between 2% and 5%.

Why is it difficult to prevent FASD?

FASD prevention is not as simple as saying, "Don't drink when pregnant". Most women do stop drinking when they learn they are pregnant. As many pregnancies are unplanned, a woman may not know she is pregnant and might expose her developing baby to alcohol unintentionally. However, alcohol is a widely used drug. In 2015, 86% of women in their childbearing years (age 15-44 years) residing in Wellington, Dufferin and Guelph reported drinking within the last 12 months and 62% reported exceeding the Low Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines (LRADGs) in 2013.⁴

How does alcohol affect an unborn baby?

A baby's brain and body develop throughout pregnancy. Through the placenta, an unborn baby receives food and oxygen needed for growing. Most things a mother eats, drinks, inhales, sniffs or injects, including alcohol, reach her baby through the placenta. Because the unborn baby's liver is still developing, alcohol stays in the baby's system longer than in the mother's system. This gives alcohol more time to damage the baby's developing cells.

Other important things to know about pregnancy and alcohol:

- There is no known safe amount of alcohol to use in pregnancy, so zero alcohol is the safest choice for developing babies.
- There is no safe type of alcohol.
- Using effective birth control is important to prevent an alcohol-exposed pregnancy.
- It is best to stop drinking before getting pregnant. Harm can occur at any time in pregnancy. Each and every day during pregnancy is more important to the baby's development.
- Many people diagnosed with an FASD do not have an intellectual disability. They do, however, have unique needs and strengths.^{5, 6}
- Sometimes, women may need help to quit drinking. Partners, family and friends can be supportive, making drinks without alcohol and reducing the amount they drink themselves. Learn more at <https://skprevention.ca/how-to-help/> or find a Community Mental Health and Addictions Professional by calling Here24/7 at 1-844-437-3247.

Alcohol is toxic and can change the structure of cells, can interfere with how the cells work together and how they do their jobs. It can cause birth defects and result in lifelong disabilities. The effects may be visible or invisible. The invisible birth defects may not be obvious until the child is in school. The brain is the organ most sensitive to alcohol because the brain continues to develop throughout pregnancy. FASD affects each person differently and some not at all.

Areas of development that may be harmed:

- Learning and memory
- Communication (speech, language)
- Behaviour (attention span, impulsivity, easily overwhelmed)
- Social and life skills (understanding social rules, cause and effect or how to have healthy relationships)
- Senses or sensory processing (hearing, seeing, touching, smelling, tasting)
- Physical (size, coordination, organs, bones, facial structure)

What is new in the field of FASD diagnosis?

In Canada, there are new guidelines for diagnosing FASD.¹ Making a diagnosis of FASD requires a multidisciplinary team (Pediatrician or Doctor with expertise in diagnosis, Occupational Therapist, Physiotherapist, Speech-Language Pathologist, Psychologist) and could include information from family, social work, justice, education and others as needed. Diagnosis is a process, not just one test, and is complex. Diagnosis includes gathering information about prenatal alcohol exposure, physical features affected by alcohol and areas of the brain and central nervous system that have been harmed or affected.

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder is now a diagnosis. The diagnosis is **FASD with Sentinel Facial Features** or **FASD without Sentinel Facial Features**. The main difference between the two is the presence of three unique

facial features (smaller eye opening, no indentation in the middle area of the upper lip and thin upper lip). For both diagnoses, there is impairment in three or more areas of the brain and confirmed prenatal alcohol exposure.

A new term is **at risk for neurodevelopmental disorder and FASD associated with prenatal alcohol exposure**. This designation is given if there is confirmed prenatal alcohol exposure and/or three distinct facial features, a clinical concern about development, but there is NOT impairment in at least three areas of the brain.¹

Why is diagnosis important?

Early diagnosis can help identify appropriate interventions to help mitigate the onset and/or severity of the disability or difficulties associated with FASD. Diagnosis is important to help put the right supports in place for children, youth, adults, families and caregivers. This can help prevent adverse outcomes such as difficulties with friends at school, mental health and substance misuse. Diagnosis can also help others learn to support the individual in home, school and in the community as they come to understand more about the disability.

Things to remember:

- Support, not judgment, makes a difference.
- Women often do not intentionally drink while pregnant to harm their baby.
- Partners can play a key role in helping pregnant women in having a healthy pregnancy.
- We all need to work together to support individuals and families living with FASD.

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