

# Alcohol and pregnancy— What everyone should know

## No amount of alcohol is safe during pregnancy.

Alcohol reduces fertility, increases the risk of miscarriage and causes brain damage and birth defects.<sup>1</sup> Prenatal exposure to alcohol can cause cognitive damage, learning disorders and mental retardation, as well as behavioral disorders such as ADHD and autism. Poor motor coordination is common. Difficulty with judgment and understanding social situations contributes to long term outcomes such as unemployment, psychiatric illness, and criminality.<sup>2</sup>

Even moderate drinking or a single binge can cause permanent damage<sup>3-5</sup>.

## Many babies in Europe are prenatally exposed to alcohol.

It is estimated that 35 to 50% of Dutch women drink during pregnancy.<sup>1</sup> A recent study in Barcelona showed that 45% of babies were heavily exposed to alcohol.<sup>6</sup> In Dublin, the Coombe Women's Hospital study found that 63% of women drink during pregnancy.<sup>7</sup> Most women do not know that even moderate drinking can harm their babies. Well-educated women are at high risk for drinking during pregnancy.<sup>8</sup>

## FASD: Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder



FASD is an umbrella term covering a range of birth defects and brain damage resulting from prenatal exposure to alcohol. The term FASD is not used as a clinical diagnosis, but

encompasses diagnoses such as Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) and related disorders. FAS is diagnosed when a child shows retarded growth, a specific pattern of minor facial anomalies and neurological damage. Children who do not show all the features of FAS may receive a diagnosis of partial FAS, Fetal Alcohol Effects, Alcohol-Related Neurodevelopmental Disorder, or Alcohol-Related Birth Defects. All persons with FASD have lifelong cognitive, social and behavioral disabilities.

## Prevalence

The prevalence of FASD in Europe is not known. Many cases are diagnosed as learning disorders, ADHD or other disorders while the underlying

role of prenatal alcohol exposure remains unrecognized. The usual estimates of prevalence in the western world run from 1 to 3 per thousand for full FAS, and 9.1 per thousand for all FASD.<sup>9</sup> A recent and alarming study in the Lazio region of Italy showed that 20 to 40 children per thousand have FASD.<sup>10</sup>

**“Of all the substances of abuse (including cocaine, heroin, and marijuana), alcohol produces by far the most serious neurobehavioral effects in the fetus.”**

*Institute of Medicine Report  
to U.S.Congress, 1996*

## Prevention

There is no cure for FASD, but it can be prevented. The incidence of FASD can be reduced by public information campaigns, support of pregnant women, and clear preconception advice.<sup>11</sup>

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