

Understanding Fetal Alcohol Syndrome



No amount of alcohol use is known to be safe during pregnancy. Any alcohol you drink also affects your baby. Sometimes even a small amount of alcohol may cause birth defects. One serious type of birth defect is known as fetal alcohol syndrome. If you're planning to become pregnant, don't drink alcohol. Talk with your healthcare provider. They can help you learn more.

What is fetal alcohol syndrome?

Fetal alcohol syndrome isn't one birth defect. It's a group of problems that include:

- A smaller head than normal
- Certain facial features, which may go away later in life
- Delayed growth, both before and after birth
- Slow mental growth or mental retardation
- A short attention span
- Behavior problems

Older children with fetal alcohol syndrome may struggle in school. They may not relate well to others and they may often get in trouble. Sometimes they may have a hard time knowing right from wrong.

What causes it?

When you drink, your baby drinks too. But alcohol stays in your baby's body longer than in yours. As a result, it may damage your baby's brain. This can happen at any time during your pregnancy. But it's most likely to happen in the first 3 months.

How you can help prevent it

You may not know you're pregnant right away. A pregnancy test can tell you 2 weeks after conception. You had no way of knowing. If you're thinking about becoming pregnant, it's best not to drink any alcohol. Once you know you're pregnant, stop drinking right away.

If you need help

If you have a problem with alcohol, talk with your healthcare provider. They can help you get treatment. Or, contact a group, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, that can offer guidance and support.

To learn more

- [Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Family Resource Institute](http://www.fetalalcoholsyndrome.org) at www.fetalalcoholsyndrome.org
- [National Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome](http://www.nofas.org) at www.nofas.org

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