

Talk It Up. Lock It Up!™ Column

What are FASDs?

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Last month, we talked about the connection between underage drinking and increases in risky decision making and risky sexual behavior. This month, we are going to take that a step farther and discuss the negative effects alcohol can have if consumed during pregnancy. And this time, it's universal...it doesn't matter whether the consumption is by those underage or of legal age, the effects are equally devastating.

Alcohol use during pregnancy can cause a condition known as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASDs), which presents as a range of lifelong physical, behavioral and intellectual disabilities and conditions. Many times, there is a mix of these problems and generally no two cases look exactly the same.

The sole cause of FASDs is exposure to alcohol as a fetus. All types of alcohol, in any amount, are equally harmful, from liquor to wine coolers. Although this sounds scary, and it is, it also means that they are completely preventable. In fact, FASDs are the only intellectual disability and birth defect that is 100% preventable. As long as a woman does not drink while pregnant, there is no risk at all! As we mentioned, there is no "safe" amount one can drink while pregnant; any consumption, no matter how small, can be harmful. But it's important to know that FASDs occur on a spectrum, so even if a woman has been drinking while pregnant for any reason, it is possible to minimize the risk by stopping as soon as possible. Since brain growth occurs throughout pregnancy, the sooner she stops drinking, the safer she and her baby will be.

Since over half of pregnancies in the US are unplanned, and most women do not know they are pregnant until about 4-6 weeks in, this presents a challenge in preventing FASDs. There is a clear risk that a woman could be drinking while pregnant and not even know it. Even if she stops as soon as she finds out, there was still a period of time that the fetus was exposed to alcohol. And this is partially why, according to the CDC, as many as 1 in 20 US school children may have some type of FASD. Some of the side effects may be so slight that it's not possible to fully diagnose them and get an exact percentage, but that doesn't mean it isn't worth working to prevent them.

So with all that, what do we do? How can we make sure that this fully preventable condition is, in fact, prevented? Here's the first thing: *get the word out*. Make sure to tell everyone you know what FASDs are, and that they are completely preventable by not drinking while pregnant. Then: *take personal responsibility*. Ensure that you are taking all the steps to prevent pregnancy (if that's your goal), hold off on drinking if there's a chance you might be pregnant until you can test to make sure, avoid drinking completely if you are purposefully trying to become pregnant. And don't forget, you can always facilitate responsible decision making by following general alcohol consumption safety guidelines: do not allow your judgement or memory to be impaired by overindulgence or binge drinking.

For more information on FASDs, where you can go for screening and diagnosis, or support and resources for families or professionals, visit FASDinNC.org.