



Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders: Diagnosis and Interventions

What is FASD?

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) is an umbrella term describing the range of effects that can occur in an individual exposed to alcohol during pregnancy. These effects may include physical, behavioral, adaptive and learning disabilities. In fact, prenatal alcohol exposure is the most common preventable cause of intellectual disability in the U.S. Current studies estimate that 2-5 percent of the population have an FASD. The most well-known condition within the spectrum is fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS). Only about 1 out of 5 people with effects of prenatal alcohol exposure meet all the criteria for a diagnosis of FAS, the rest fall elsewhere on the spectrum.

How can I recognize an FASD?

The signs of an FASD are different depending on a person's development within their lifespan, and only trained professionals can make a diagnosis. Signs that may indicate the need for an assessment include:

- Known or suspected prenatal alcohol exposure
- Slow physical growth or weight gain
- Small head or facial/dental abnormalities
- Heart defects, organ dysfunction or deformities of joints, limbs or fingers
- Sleeping, breathing or feeding problems
- Intellectual disability or delayed development
- Behavior problems and learning disabilities
- Vision or hearing problems
- Sensory processing or motor difficulties

Why is diagnosis important?

Most people with an FASD have no visible signs of alcohol exposure. Their problems may be misdiagnosed, blamed on poor parenting or “treated” with increasing consequences and discipline, leading to frustration for all involved. Early identification and intervention contributes to positive long-term outcomes and offers an individual the best opportunity to achieve their full potential. Accurate diagnosis can help:

- Identify and refer the individual for appropriate services
- Align understanding and aid communication among caregivers, educators, clinicians and families
- Help an individual and their family better understand their unique combination of strengths and impairments

Where can I get a diagnosis?

Mission Hospital developed the first interdisciplinary FASD clinic in North Carolina. Our team consists of a geneticist, psychologist, occupational therapist, speech language pathologist and clinical social worker. The team has been trained to evaluate a child with a known or suspected prenatal alcohol exposure and understand how this exposure may be impacting the child’s health, learning and behavior.

To learn more, visit mission-health.org/genetics or call the FASD Clinic Coordinator at Mission Fullerton Genetics Center at (828) 213-1051 or (888) 810-2800.

