

# Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder

## What is Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder?

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is a term used to describe impacts on the brain and body of individuals prenatally exposed to alcohol.

FASD is a lifelong disability and the leading preventable developmental disability in Canada. Individuals with FASD will experience some degree of challenges in their daily living, and need support with motor skills, physical health, learning, memory, attention, communication, emotional regulation and social skills to reach their full potential. Children, youth and adults with FASD will be affected in different ways, each with their own strengths and challenges.

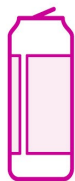
## How much alcohol causes FASD?

**There is no safe amount, time or type of alcohol to drink during pregnancy.** FASD is prevented by not drinking any alcohol during pregnancy. It is not known how much alcohol it takes to cause harm. Your baby's brain and nervous system develop throughout your pregnancy and continue to develop until your child is in their mid-20s.

Alcohol use is harmful to health. Any amount and all types of alcohol, including beer, wine, spirits, mixed drinks, coolers and ciders, can harm you and your baby. Drinking more than 3 standard drinks at one time (binge drinking) and regular drinking in pregnancy (most days) put you and your baby at the greatest risk of harm. A standard drink is:



**Beer**  
341 ml (12 oz) of beer  
5% alcohol



or  
**Cooler, cider, ready-to-drink**  
341 ml (12 oz) of drinks  
5% alcohol



or  
**Wine**  
142 ml (5 oz) of wine  
12% alcohol



or  
**Spirits**  
(whisky, vodka, gin, etc.)  
43 ml (1.5 oz) of spirits  
40% alcohol

## How can I prevent FASD?

If you're planning a pregnancy, it's best to stop drinking alcohol in advance. As almost 50% of pregnancies in Canada are unplanned, it's also best to use birth control if you drink alcohol and are having sex that could result in a pregnancy to reduce the risk of FASD.

Drinking less or no alcohol is better for your health and the health of your baby. The less you drink, the lower your risk. There is no known safe amount of alcohol use when pregnant, trying to get pregnant, or when there is a possibility that you may become pregnant. Not drinking alcohol has many health benefits, including better sleep and better mental and physical health.

For more information on pregnancy and alcohol use, visit [HealthLinkBC File #38d Pregnancy and alcohol use](#).

For more information on alcohol and health, visit [Canada's Guidance for Alcohol and Health](#).

**Alcohol and Drug Information and Referral Service** is available 24/7 for information on where counselling is available in your area. Call 604-660-9382 in the Lower Mainland or toll-free in B.C. at 1-800-663-1441.

## Does drinking during breast/chest feeding cause FASD?

No, drinking alcohol while breast/chest feeding or expressing human milk to feed by bottle does not cause FASD. However, your baby is exposed to a small amount of alcohol that passes into your milk when you drink. Alcohol can also impact the taste and reduce the amount of milk available to your baby. This can affect infant sleep patterns, your milk letdown, the amount of milk your baby takes and your baby's behaviour.

It is best to avoid alcohol if you're breast/chest feeding, but if you want to have an occasional drink, it does not mean you need to stop nursing.

Breast/chest feeding is important for the health and well-being of both lactating parents and babies. If you choose to drink alcohol while feeding your baby, it is important that you plan around it. If you are going to have a drink, it is recommended that you feed your baby and store milk before you start drinking. How soon you can start breast/chest feeding again will depend on how many drinks you have. Ideally, it is best to avoid breast/chest feeding for about 2 hours for each alcoholic beverage consumed. For example, if a person has 2 alcoholic drinks, they should wait at least 4 hours before breast/chest feeding.

You can pump or express milk as needed to relieve any discomfort from engorgement, but "pumping and dumping" milk will not lower the level of alcohol in your milk faster. Only time allows the alcohol level in the milk to drop.

Drinking alcohol while caring for an infant or child is also risky and can make caregivers less aware of what the child needs, impair their judgement, reaction time, and ability to provide safe care, putting children at increased risk of harm.

### **When can FASD and other effects of alcohol be diagnosed?**

Getting a FASD diagnosis can be difficult. There is no single test that can cover the disorder's wide range of signs and symptoms. An early diagnosis and appropriate interventions and support result in more positive outcomes for people with the disorder.

If you are worried about your infant or child, speak to your health care provider. A referral can be made to have your child assessed by a team of health professionals.

### **Where can families and caregivers go for help?**

Community resources in your regional health region, such as child development programs, may help support families and children.

Examples of available services include:

- Key Workers: help families understand FASD by providing information and connecting them to support services
- Parent Support: includes mentoring, offering support groups and FASD training for parents and grandparents

Some communities have additional support services and groups for parents and caregivers and their children with FASD.

For more information on these and other programs and services in your area, visit Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) at [www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/managing-your-health/child-behaviour-development/support-needs/fetal-alcohol-spectrum-disorder-fasd](http://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/managing-your-health/child-behaviour-development/support-needs/fetal-alcohol-spectrum-disorder-fasd).

To contact your public health unit and find services that are available in your area, visit the HealthLink BC - Find health services at [www.healthlinkbc.ca/find-care/find-health-services](http://www.healthlinkbc.ca/find-care/find-health-services) or call **8-1-1**. When you call the public health unit, ask for a public health nurse.

### **For more information**

**Canada FASD Research Network (CanFASD): What is FASD?**

<https://canfasd.ca/what-is-fasd/>.

**The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada (SOGC): Substance use in pregnancy**

[www.pregnancyinfo.ca/your-pregnancy/healthy-pregnancy/substance-use-in-pregnancy/alcohol/](http://www.pregnancyinfo.ca/your-pregnancy/healthy-pregnancy/substance-use-in-pregnancy/alcohol/)

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