

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder: Topic of the Month

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The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) brings awareness to the fact there is no “safe” amount of alcohol consumed while pregnant. Alcohol is recognized as a leading cause of birth defects and developmental delays in the United States. Every year countless children are born with disabilities related to prenatal alcohol exposure. Read this topic memo to learn about fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD).

The facts

According to the NIAAA, **Fetal Alcohol Exposure** can occur when alcohol is consumed during pregnancy. When consumed, alcohol passes easily through the parental bloodstream to the developing fetus. **The Center for Disease Control and Infection (CDC) reports that there is no safe time during pregnancy to drink alcohol. However, during the first three months of pregnancy, there is an increased risk to the developing brain of the fetus.**

Infants that do develop FASD may experience lifelong disabilities, some of the many difficulties related are listed below.

FASD related difficulties:

- Struggles to learn and remember
- Delays in speech and language
- Trouble understanding and following directions
- Hard to shift attention and focus
- Issues controlling emotions and impulsivity
- Struggle to perform some daily life tasks
- Can suffer from other mental health disorders (co-occurring)

Read [Understanding Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders](#) to learn more.

Risks

The risk factors for FASD are related to the quantity, frequency, and timing of alcohol consumption during pregnancy. Other factors that contribute to the effects of alcohol consumption on the fetus are maternal characteristics (nutrition, age, smoking, high BMI), environmental factors (living conditions), and genetics.

Prenatal support

About one in two pregnancies in the U.S. are unplanned. When a participant arrives at WIC, the education, resources, and referrals we provide can offer support towards achieving a healthy pregnancy. Below are some tips to offer newly pregnant participants.

Tips for those newly pregnant:

- Make an appointment with one's health care provider
- Begin prenatal vitamins (one containing folic acid/iron/iodine)
- Consume three balanced daily meals and two to three snacks
- Stay hydrated (drink water everyday)
- Get plenty of rest
- Limit emotional and physical stress
- Avoid alcohol, drugs, and smoking

WIC's role

During the [WIC Nutrition Assessment](#) we ask questions and probe further on a variety of topics to determine what education and support we may offer participants. In the *'Environmental/Other Factors'* section of the [WIC Nutrition Assessment Tools](#) we ask participants about drugs, alcohol, and smoking.

Discussions surrounding drugs or alcohol are often uncomfortable but are also very important. The way we ask a question can make all the difference. When asking about alcohol use, it is best to remain non-judgmental and use open-ended questions.

Some examples include:

- "What concerns do you have about the use of alcohol?"
- "How often, if ever, do you consume alcohol?"
- "What has your health care provider shared about alcohol use during pregnancy?"

WIC's role in preventing FASD is limited. Staff may offer information about alcohol's impact on pregnancy and breastfeeding and refer participants to their health care provider for more information and support.

Supporting the child

If a parent shares that their child has been diagnosed with FASD, likely they have been offered support from the child's health care provider. During the Nutrition Assessment, we will want to assess if the child's condition has affected their dietary intake, growth, or development. Risk code [382 Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders](#) provides more information about implications for WIC Nutrition Services (see page 5).

If a participant shares that they have FASD, staff should be mindful of their unique learning needs. We can ask questions to determine if they understand the information provided and are receiving the support and resources they need.

Questions may include:

- “Now that I have explained the WIC program, what questions do you have for me today?”
- “How has your (or your child’s) diagnosis impacted your (their) health and/or eating habits?”
- “Tell me about any support services you are receiving.”
- “Can I share with you the resources that are available in our area?”

Support programs

[Help Me Connect](#): A navigator to connect pregnant individuals and families with young children (birth-8 years old) with services in the community.

[The Arc of Minnesota](#): Provides information and connection to resources for people with developmental disabilities and their families and also acts as an advocate when needed.

[Proof of unwavering support](#): Proof Alliance understands that taking care of children with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) or who have symptoms of prenatal alcohol exposure, can be challenging. Proof Alliance wants to provide as much support as they can.

NOTE: These are only a few suggestions; please refer to your local agency resources for more options to offer families.

Staff resources

[Minnesota WIC Risk Criteria- Exhibit 5T](#) (MDH)

[382 Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders](#) (MDH)

[Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder](#) (MDH)

[Alcohol Use and its Impact on Women’s Health](#): WIC Works, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)

[FASD Resources](#) (CDC)

References- complete listing of hyperlinks:

[Understanding Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders](https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/brochures-and-fact-sheets/understanding-fetal-alcohol-spectrum-disorders)
(<https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/brochures-and-fact-sheets/understanding-fetal-alcohol-spectrum-disorders>)

[WIC Nutrition Assessment](https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/wic/localagency/training/na.html)
(<https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/wic/localagency/training/na.html>)

WIC Nutrition Assessment Tools

(<https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/wic/localagency/training/na.html#tools>)

382 Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders

(<https://www.health.state.mn.us/docs/people/wic/localagency/nutrition/riskcodes/382.pdf>)

Help Me Connect (<https://helpmeconnect.web.health.state.mn.us/HelpMeConnect/>)

The Arc of Minnesota (<https://arcminnesota.org/>)

Proof of unwavering support (<https://www.proofalliance.org/for-individuals-and-families/i-am-a-caregiver/>)

Minnesota WIC Risk Criteria- Exhibit 5T

(https://www.health.state.mn.us/docs/people/wic/localagency/program/mom/exhbts/ex5/5t_new.pdf)

382 Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders

(<https://www.health.state.mn.us/docs/people/wic/localagency/nutrition/riskcodes/382.pdf>)

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder

(<https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/cy/fetalalcohol.html>)

Alcohol Use and its Impact on Women's Health

(<https://wicworks.fns.usda.gov/resources/alcohol-use-and-its-impact-womens-health>)

FASD Resources

(https://www.cdc.gov/fasd/resources/?CDC_AAref_Val=https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/fasd/materials.html)

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