



Empowering Children. Supporting Families. Building Brighter Futures.

Resource 085 | Other developmental health conditions

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders

What it means

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASDs) describe a range of effects associated with alcohol exposure before birth. They can involve learning, attention, regulation, growth, and daily living skills. Some children have characteristic physical findings; many do not. Assessment and support should be respectful, practical, and free of family blame. [1]

Causes and risk factors

Alcohol exposure during pregnancy can affect developing brain and body systems. Effects vary with several factors, and an individual's difficulties cannot be predicted from exposure history alone. FASDs are not caused by a child's behavior. Accurate, confidential history helps assessment and should be gathered sensitively. [1,2]

General family education. A concern deserves assessment, but this guide does not diagnose a child or prescribe treatment.



Signs and everyday impact

Possible concerns include learning and memory difficulties, attention and impulse-control differences, trouble adapting to changes, and challenges with everyday skills. Growth or physical findings may occur in some diagnoses. Features overlap with other conditions, so appearance or behavior alone cannot establish FASD. [1,2]

Assessment and diagnosis

A trained team reviews development, medical history, exposure information when available, physical findings, and standardized functional assessments. There is no single blood test that diagnoses all FASDs. The team considers alternative or co-occurring conditions. The specific diagnostic framework and terminology can vary by country and service. [1,2]

Treatment and therapy

Early developmental and educational support can improve participation. Strategies include communication support, predictable environments, explicit teaching, caregiver coaching, and accommodations matched to the child's functional profile. Medical and mental health conditions receive targeted treatment; no medicine treats all FASD effects. Support needs should be reassessed as expectations change. [1,2,3]

Support at home

Use clear, short instructions, visual reminders, and repeated supported practice. Reduce competing demands and prepare for transitions. Interpret uneven performance in light of memory and regulation needs. Coordinate caregivers and educators so the child receives consistent help, and seek support for the family.

When to seek help

Arrange evaluation for persistent developmental or functional concerns. New regression, seizures, serious feeding problems, or immediate safety risks require appropriate medical or urgent assessment rather than attribution to FASD alone.

Questions for your care team

- Which diagnostic framework and assessments are being used?
- What functional strengths and difficulties should guide support?
- How can home and school provide consistent accommodations?



Podcast preparation

Use this outline to develop a later podcast script.

Suggested opening

Welcome to Mariel Early Intervention. Today we discuss fetal alcohol spectrum disorders. Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASDs) describe a range of effects associated with alcohol exposure before birth. This is general education; each child needs individualized care.

Opening: Define the topic and its developmental context.

Understanding: Explain causes and signs without inviting self-diagnosis.

Assessment: Describe evaluation and distinguish screening from diagnosis.

Support: Discuss treatment, therapy, and practical family supports.

Closing: Explain urgent signs and one clear next step.

Misconception to address: Myth: FASD always has recognizable facial features. Many affected children do not have those features.

Before recording: update clinical references and local service details, arrange clinical review, and use fully consented or fictional examples.

Terms in plain language

- Spectrum: a range of related presentations and effects.
- Prenatal exposure: exposure occurring before birth.
- Accommodation: a change that helps someone participate or demonstrate skills.

Sources and further reading

Sources accessed 3 October 2026. Numbered references support the clinical overview. Treatment availability and referral routes vary by country.

[1] About Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASDs)

<https://www.cdc.gov/fasd/about/index.html>

[2] Treatment of FASDs

<https://www.cdc.gov/fasd/treatment/index.html>

[3] Assessing Developmental Delays in Children

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/toddler/Pages/Assessing-Developmental-Delays.aspx>