

Reducing Stigma Associated with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASDs)



What are FASDs?

- FASDs are a range of disabilities (including behavioral, intellectual, and physical) that can occur when a baby's brain and body are exposed to alcohol before they are born.^{1,2}
- FASDs can affect growth and development, thinking and learning, and behaviors throughout life.²

What is stigma and why does it matter?

- Stigma refers to “a set of negative and unfair beliefs that a society or group of people have about something.”⁶
- Stigma can:
 - Prevent pregnant people from seeking help
 - Delay diagnoses
 - Lead to isolation and social exclusion
 - Reduce support and access to services^{7, 8, 9}
- Stigma can be directed at:
 - A person who has consumed alcohol during pregnancy
 - A person with an FASD
 - A family member or friend of a person who has consumed alcohol during pregnancy or who is caring for a person with an FASD

DID YOU KNOW?

- Approximately 42% of U.S. pregnancies are unintended.³
- Approximately 15% of pregnant individuals report drinking alcohol.⁴
- Alcohol use during pregnancy is a leading preventable cause of birth defects and neurodevelopmental disabilities in the U.S.⁵

What can local health department staff do?

- Learn more about FASDs and educate others.
- Use nonjudgmental, person-first language (e.g., “individual with an FASD” instead of “FASD kid”).
- Avoid language that shames or blames when discussing alcohol use in pregnancy (e.g., “The patient confirmed prenatal alcohol exposure” instead of “The pregnant patient admitted to alcohol use”).
- Tailor conversations to promote substance-free pregnancies and prevent FASDs, considering audience, pregnancy intention, and alcohol use patterns (e.g., not pregnant and not intending to be pregnant, pregnant and drinking alcohol, partner or friend, etc.).
- Support early identification and referrals to appropriate services.

Tailor Conversations To Promote Substance-Free Pregnancies



Currently Pregnant/Intending to Become Pregnant Soon

“Alcohol can harm a developing baby before you know you’re pregnant. Choosing not to drink alcohol if you are trying to become pregnant or could become pregnant helps you have a healthy pregnancy from the start.”

“Your health always matters, including when you are pregnant, and we know you want the best for your baby. Let’s talk about ways to have the healthiest pregnancy for you and your baby.”



Partner

“Have you thought about ways to support your pregnant partner, including not drinking alcohol? Choose to support your pregnant partner by encouraging them not to drink alcohol either.”



Community

“Parents and caregivers want what’s best for their kids. Life experiences can shape what people have control over. Our community can help parents and caregivers by being a support for pregnant people we know. Talk about the risk of alcohol use during pregnancy, connect pregnant people to resources, and educate others about how stigma can prevent pregnant people from getting help.”

For more messages and resources
to promote substance-free
pregnancies and prevent FASDs,
visit: bit.ly/NACCHO_FASD



¹ American Academy of Pediatrics. (2021, November 29). *Common fetal alcohol spectrum disorder definitions*. <https://www.aap.org/en/patient-care/fetal-alcohol-spectrum-disorders/common-definitions/>

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2024). *About fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASDs)*. <https://www.cdc.gov/fasd/about/index.html>

³ Rossen, L. M., Hamilton, B. E., Abma, J. C., Gregory, E. C. W., Beresovsky, V., Resendez, A. V., Chandra, A., & Martin, J. A. (2023). *Updated methodology to estimate overall and unintended pregnancy rates in the United States* (Vital and Health Statistics, Series 2, No. 201). National Center for Health Statistics. <https://dx.doi.org/10.15620/cdc:124395>

⁴ Thomas, S. A., Gosdin, L. K., Terplan, M., Kim, S. Y., & Deputy, N. P. (2026). Alcohol consumption during pregnancy among women aged 18–49 years — United States, 2021–2024. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 75(22), 280–284. <https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm7522a2>

⁵ National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. (2025, December). *Understanding fetal alcohol spectrum disorders*. <https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/brochures-and-fact-sheets/understanding-fetal-alcohol-spectrum-disorders>

⁶ Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Stigma. In Merriam-Webster.com dictionary. Retrieved June 25, 2024, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stigma>

⁷ Bos, A. E. R., Pryor, J. B., Reeder, G. D., & Stutterheim, S. E. (2013). Stigma: Advances in theory and research. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 35(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01973533.2012.746147>

⁸ Corrigan, P. W., & Watson, A. C. (2002). Understanding the impact of stigma on people with mental illness. *World Psychiatry: Official Journal of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA)*, 1(1), 16–20.

⁹ Roozen, S., Stutterheim, S. E., Bos, A. E. R., Kok, G., & Curfs, L. M. G. (2022). Understanding the social stigma of fetal alcohol spectrum disorders: From theory to interventions. *Foundations of Science*, 27(2), 753–771. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10699-020-09676-y>