

Patient information from BMJ

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Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders: what treatments work?

Children whose mothers drink alcohol heavily while pregnant can have serious physical and mental health problems, including birth defects, brain damage, and learning difficulties.

If you think that your child might be affected in this way, there are treatments that can help. You can use our information to talk with your doctor about what might help your child the most.

What treatments work?

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) is a term that covers the various problems that can affect a child whose mother drank heavily or had problems with alcohol while pregnant.

You might hear doctors use different terms to describe these problems. For example, they might talk about:

- fetal alcohol syndrome
- alcohol-related neurodevelopmental disorder, and
- alcohol-related birth defects.

These terms all mean something slightly different, but they all deal with the damage caused by alcohol.

There is no cure for FASD, and every child has different needs, strengths, and challenges. So treatment should be tailored to the needs of each individual child.

With this in mind, children's needs and the treatments available broadly cover help with the following areas. You can ask your doctor about any of these treatments if you think that they might help your child.

Help with school and learning

Children affected by FASD can benefit from programmes designed for children with all kinds of learning difficulties.

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For example, a method called cognitive control therapy is designed to help improve some of the skills that children need for doing well in school, including:

- good body position, movement, and awareness
- paying attention, and
- making sense of information.

Other programmes help children with learning difficulties to improve their skills in language and speaking, reading, spelling, and math.

Children with FASD can struggle to focus for long periods. So some of these programmes use fun modern technology, such as virtual-reality games, to help with learning and to teach new skills.

Help with daily life skills

The medical name for the skills you need to lead your daily life is “executive function”. It covers things like:

- paying attention
- organizing your daily life
- keeping track of what you’re doing, and
- staying focused.

Some programmes have been developed that focus on these skills in children with learning difficulties.

Help with social skills

Social skills training has been used with success for children with many issues. It can help with things like:

- dealing with friendships
- problem solving
- understanding other people’s point of view
- communication, and
- body language.

Help with ADHD

ADHD stands for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Children with ADHD find it hard to concentrate, are often overactive, and often act without thinking.

ADHD is common among people with FASD. (For more information, see our leaflets on ADHD.)

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There are various programmes that can help children with ADHD, as well as medications that can help children to focus and concentrate. You can talk with your doctor about what might be the best option for your child.

What will happen?

A big part of helping a child with FASD is simply learning about the condition. So your doctor should give you useful information about how your child is affected, and about what you can do to understand and to help.

This should include information about:

- community services
- government and educational support, and
- local parent-help groups that provide information and support for children and their families.

Unfortunately there is no cure for FASD, and children don't grow out of it or get better. The outlook for an individual depends on many things, including:

- getting an accurate diagnosis as young as possible
- how severely he or she affected to begin with
- whether treatment is helpful, and
- having a home life that is as stable, nurturing, and understanding as possible.

Children and young people with FASD should have a review with their doctor at least once a year, to check their progress and assess whether they need extra help. Your doctor will check up on progress and any problems with things like:

- movement, speech, and language
- education
- social skills
- behavior and mental health
- drug and alcohol issues
- complications of any birth defects.

Many children with FASD do well with the right support and treatment, and there are success stories. But, for many, life is tough.

Without the right help, most children with FASD struggle to stay in education and employment. Only about 14 in 100 young adults with FASD live independently. Most live in institutions or assisted-living settings.

Many young people with FASD find themselves in trouble with the law, and many have problems with mental health and with alcohol addiction.

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There are many organizations and charities that help children with FASD and their families and carers. Your doctor might be able to help you find a support group in your area, or you could search online.

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