

FASD 101

Talking to the Media About Alcohol, Pregnancy, and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder

The way we talk or write about alcohol, pregnancy, and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder can impact whether our initiatives to increase awareness about FASD, prevent FASD and support people with FASD are successful. Our language can either portray people in a positive way or continue to reinforce stereotypes and stigma about women who drink alcohol during pregnancy and people with FASD. This short resource provides examples of responses to questions commonly asked about FASD by the media. These examples can help you develop consistent messages about FASD that are empowering and promote dignity among individuals with FASD and their families.

ONE: What is FASD?

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is a diagnostic term used to describe impacts on the brain and body of individuals prenatally exposed to alcohol. FASD is a lifelong disability. Individuals with FASD will experience some degree of challenges in their daily living, need support with motor skills, physical health, learning, memory, attention, communication, emotional regulation, and social skills, to reach their full potential. Each individual with FASD is unique and has areas of both strengths and challenges.



Related Questions: Is FASD a permanent disability? Is there a cure for FASD?

- Although FASD is a spectrum, research shows us that early and appropriate supports can make a positive impact and improve outcomes for those with the disability.
- There is no “cure” for FASD, but early identification and intervention is shown to foster more positive outcomes for people with FASD

TWO: How many people have FASD?

Current studies suggest that up to 4% of individuals in Canada have FASD- that is approximately 1,451,600 people with FASD in Canada today.



Related Questions: What about children in care? What about Indigenous people? What about people involved with the justice system?

- Rates of FASD are higher in vulnerable populations, including those involved in the child welfare and justice systems. FASD does not only affect Indigenous people. All groups of people who drink alcohol are at risk for FASD.

THREE: What kinds of challenges do people with FASD face?



Although people with FASD experience complex challenges, they also possess resilience, strengths, abilities, and offer unique and valuable contributions to society.

Related Questions: What about the high rates of mental health and substance use for people with FASD? What about the high rates of involvement with the justice system for people with FASD?

- When unsupported, people with FASD are faced with especially high rates of mental health and substance use difficulties.
- The complex challenges and life experiences that individuals with FASD experience may lead to increased risk for a range of adverse outcomes, including involvement in the criminal justice system.

FOUR: What do we know about alcohol and pregnancy?

Experts agree there is no safe level of drinking during pregnancy. It is safest not to drink during pregnancy.

Related Questions: What causes FASD? Why do women drink during pregnancy?

- FASD is caused by prenatal alcohol exposure or when a developing baby is exposed to alcohol.
- Research tells us that women do not intentionally seek to harm their unborn children. Some women may be unaware of their pregnancy when drinking heavily. Some women have addictions and mental health challenges and find quitting extremely difficult despite pregnancy. Some women have abusive partners who pressure them to drink while pregnant.



FIVE: What do we know about cannabis and pregnancy?



There is currently no known safe level of cannabis to consume during pregnancy. It is safest to not use cannabis during pregnancy. Refer to The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada website for more information about cannabis use during pregnancy.

Related Questions: What effects does cannabis have on a developing baby? What about using several substances at once (i.e. alcohol and cannabis)?

- Unlike alcohol, the implications of cannabis use during pregnancy are not adequately researched or interpreted. The serious potential lifelong effects of alcohol exposure in pregnancy are known, yet a safe level of use cannot be established.
- While drugs, such as alcohol, cannabis, tobacco, cocaine, and opioids, are often discussed in isolation, they are rarely used alone, and polysubstance use increases the potential risks of harm and impacts long-term health.

Tips for Talking to the Media

1

Prepare ahead of time- memorize a mental shortlist of important points, role-play responding to questions with a co-worker or in front of the mirror.

2

Use your own conversational style of speech- it's more effective to be yourself.

3

Think about who your audience is- what are the key points you want to emphasize?

4

Avoid using jargon and acronyms, e.g., teratogen, diagnostic criteria.

5

Use bridging phrases to bring people to the point that you want to make- acknowledge the question, but don't agree with the problem:

- That's an interesting question, however, based on our work, I think the important issue is...
- Before we get off that topic, let me just add...
- Let me put that in perspective...
- It's important to remember that...

6

Focus on the strengths and resilience of people with FASD and their families. Avoid words like "suffering from," "afflicted with," "burden to society," "cost to society," "victim" and "damaged by". Individuals with FASD should always be referred to using person-centred language.