

FASD and the Role of Fathers

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) can include birth defects, brain injury, and disabilities.^{1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12} More than 40 years of research has found that FASD is caused by drinking during pregnancy.^{13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21} Because of this, all major health groups advise not drinking any alcohol throughout pregnancy. On the other hand, there is very little research that looks at how a father's drinking may affect the fetus.

Scientists say that more research needs to be done before they are able to decide about fathers' role in FASD.²²

Some animal studies have found unhealthy effects in rats whose fathers were given alcohol but whose mothers were not. Effects included smaller size, organ failure, and reduced learning and memory.²³ There have been very few studies done with humans that look at how a man's alcohol use may affect the fetus.²⁴ Because of this, researchers are not yet able to say if a father's alcohol use can be dangerous to the fetus. In theory, a father's genes may play a role in how vulnerable or at risk the fetus is to different substances like alcohol.²⁵ This means that if both parents drink alcohol, there could in theory be a higher risk of harmful effects than if there was only alcohol exposure from the mother. There are other reasons a man might choose not to drink alcohol when his partner is trying to get pregnant. Alcohol can affect sperm and make it harder to conceive.^{26, 27}

The science is very clear that drinking alcohol during pregnancy is unsafe; it can cause birth defects and lifelong disabilities. However, there is not enough research yet to decide if the father's alcohol use can also be unsafe. Even so, drinking less or completely giving up alcohol can be a healthy choice for men. There are many health benefits linked with drinking less alcohol. This is also a way to be supportive of their partner choosing an alcohol-free pregnancy. Pregnant people who have a supportive partner are more likely to give up unsafe behaviors like drinking, which can improve the health outcomes of both the mother and the child.²⁸ Because of this, organizations like the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) both recommend that partners actively support alcohol-free pregnancies.^{29, 30}

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