

# What are the differences between FASD and ADHD?

There are many similarities between fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Both disorders can affect brain function, development and behavior. While many of the effects of FASD and ADHD are similar, research suggests that the parts of the brain that are most affected differ between the two disorders.<sup>1</sup> Because of this, FASD has been linked with more executive function issues than ADHD.<sup>2</sup> Executive function includes things like self-control, reasoning, problem solving and planning.<sup>3</sup>

People can have both FASD and ADHD at the same time. Studies have found that people with FASD are 10 times more likely to have ADHD.<sup>4</sup> Other studies have found that about half of children with FASD also have ADHD.<sup>5</sup> If someone has both FASD and ADHD, it is important that their care team considers both diagnoses when planning and implementing treatment. Treatment responses for people with ADHD and FASD are different from those who only have ADHD.<sup>6</sup> For example, people with FASD and ADHD may react differently to stimulant medication than those who only have ADHD.<sup>7</sup>

## How are FASD and ADHD similar?

### In both disorders:

- Drinking alcohol during pregnancy can be the cause.<sup>8,9</sup>
- However, ADHD can also be caused by genes, tobacco or drug use during pregnancy, brain injury, and other things. FASD is only caused by drinking during pregnancy.
- The effects are typically lifelong.<sup>10,11</sup>
- Brain structure may be affected.<sup>12,13</sup>
- Early intervention can help.<sup>14,15</sup>
- Effects can include hyperactivity, impulsive behavior and short attention span.<sup>16,17,18,19,20,21</sup>
- Those affected may have sensitivity to light, touch, taste, smell or sound.<sup>22,23</sup>
- There may be a link to microcephaly, which is when the head and brain are much smaller than expected.<sup>24,25</sup>
- Those affected may have difficulty in school.<sup>26,27</sup>
- Both disorders are listed in the ICD-10 (International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems) and the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5).<sup>28,29,30,31</sup>

## How are FASD and ADHD different?

- FASD affects about 1 in 20 children in the United States.<sup>32</sup> ADHD affects about 1 in 10.<sup>33</sup>
- FASD does not have specific treatment options.<sup>34</sup> ADHD has specific treatment options, such as psychostimulants.<sup>35</sup>
- People with FASD typically have trouble with overstimulation.<sup>36</sup> People with ADHD typically have trouble with understimulation.<sup>37</sup>
- People with FASD may have issues with speech, language, and memory. People with ADHD typically do not.<sup>38, 39</sup>

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