



FETAL ALCOHOL SPECTRUM DISORDER (UPDATE 2009)

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is a leading cause of environment-related birth defects and developmental disabilities in North America. The Canadian Medical Association (CMA) believes that the prudent choice for women who are or may become pregnant is to abstain from alcohol, and encourages their partners to support them in this endeavour. The CMA urges Canadian governments to enact legislation that requires alcoholic beverages sold in Canada to be labelled with warnings of the hazards of consuming alcohol during pregnancy. The CMA also calls upon the federal government to examine the role that advertising plays in promoting the consumption of alcoholic beverages and to review existing policies and regulations in this area.

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) is an umbrella term used to describe the range of disabilities and diagnoses that result from drinking alcohol during pregnancy. It is estimated that more than 3,000 babies in Canada are born with FASD every year.

Those who live with FASD may have mild to very severe problems with their health. They may have delays in their development, intellectual problems and problems in their social lives. Examples of these include:

- skeletal abnormalities such as facial deformities
- physical disabilities such as kidney and internal organ problems

- depression or obsessive-compulsive disorder
- difficulty understanding the consequences of their actions

These disabilities are lifelong and those affected may need lifelong support.

The drinking patterns of teenagers and the potential for women of reproductive age to consume alcohol mean that the health care system must actively address the prevention of FASD. Also, alcohol use may play a considerable role in unplanned pregnancy and inadequate prenatal and postnatal care.

The CMA strongly supports all activities that encourage Canadians to moderate their alcohol consumption. The association encourages the public to be aware of the issues related to alcohol consumption, particularly the adverse effects on the fetus.

In a continued effort to support the reduction of alcohol consumption, the CMA urges Canadian governments to enact legislation that requires alcoholic beverages sold in Canada to be labelled with warnings of the hazards of alcohol consumption during pregnancy.¹ Appropriate agencies should also adopt regulations and/or policies to ensure that warnings about the adverse interaction between alcohol and both prescription and non-prescription products are prominently displayed or distributed wherever alcohol and drugs are sold or dispensed.² The CMA also calls upon the federal government to examine the role that advertising plays in promoting the consumption of alcoholic beverages and to review existing policies and regulations in this area.

The adverse effects of alcohol consumption by pregnant women are preventable. The CMA believes that the prudent choice for women who are or may become pregnant is to abstain from alcohol and encourages their partners to support them in this endeavour. Physicians should use appropriate screening methods to identify

alcohol use in their patients. Physicians can play a leading role in educating and counselling women, spouses and family members about the dangers of alcohol to the fetus. The CMA also recommends that alcohol and drug addiction treatment services give high priority to the needs of pregnant women seeking help.

¹ General Council resolution 89-67: That the Canadian Medical Association urge Governments in Canada to enact legislation requiring that all alcoholic beverages sold in Canada be labelled with warnings on the hazard from the consumption of alcohol during pregnancy. Note: this motion was rescinded because it was superseded by the Policy on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (2000).

² General Council resolution 87-31