



Guidance on fetal alcohol syndrome aims to improve diagnosis and treatment in Scotland

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Guidelines to help doctors diagnose fetal alcohol spectrum disorder have been published by the Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network,¹ the first in the UK to cover the disorder.

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) describes a cluster of birth defects resulting from alcohol exposure during pregnancy. It can result in brain damage and in its most severe form can cause physical issues including a smaller head and poor growth.

The children affected can have poor education attainment, mental health problems, and a higher risk of addiction to alcohol and other drugs. The guidelines say that early diagnosis can allow access to early intervention and support.

Around 3.2% of babies born in the UK are estimated to be affected by FASD. Currently, prenatal exposure to alcohol is not considered in many children as a possible cause of neurodevelopment disorder, particularly those with attention deficit and hyperkinetic disorders (ADHD) or autism spectrum disorder. This may contribute to an adverse outcome for the child, and identification of FASD can help motivate mothers to abstain from alcohol in subsequent pregnancies.

Patricia Jackson, senior fellow of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health and co-chair of the Guideline Development Group, said, "FASD remains undiagnosed in the majority of cases. Diagnosis is currently dependent on professionals being aware of the condition and confident in carrying out a diagnostic assessment.

"For people with FASD, early identification and support can mean fewer mental health issues, better educational achievements, and improved life chances, reducing the possibility of later difficulties such as homelessness and involvement with the criminal justice system."

Screening

The new guidelines recommend that all pregnant and postpartum women should be screened for alcohol use with validated

measurement tools. Women should be advised not to consume alcohol in pregnancy, and those drinking above the low risk guideline for the general population (1-2 units a day) should be offered early brief interventions such as counselling. Women identified as having a pattern of risky or harmful alcohol use should be offered further intervention appropriate to their needs.

The chief medical officer for Scotland, Catherine Calderwood, said, "Early diagnosis of FASD can make a huge difference in a child's life, and these guidelines will help raise awareness of the condition among healthcare professionals. We recently announced support for families affected by FASD in our programme for government, and we highlighted this condition and actions focused on prevention and early intervention in our recent alcohol framework."

The diagnostic criteria for FASD are:

- Confirmation of prenatal alcohol exposure
- Evidence of severe impairment in at least three neurodevelopment abnormalities such as cognition, language, attention, motor skills, memory, academic achievement, and executive functioning including impulse control and hyperactivity, and
- A specific pattern of three facial abnormalities including short palpebral fissures, indistinct philtrum, and thin upper lip (for FASD with sentinel facial features only).

Correction: Two additional diagnostic criteria were originally included in the list in error. We removed these on Monday 28 January.

1 NHS Scotland. SIGN 156: Children and young people exposed prenatally to alcohol. Jan 2019. <https://www.sign.ac.uk/assets/sign156.pdf>.

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