



FASD-CAN
Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder
Care Action Network

FASD-CAN AOTEAROA INFORMATION SHEET

FASD, Alcohol Consumption and Pregnancy

This information sheet provides important information for anyone who is pregnant, planning a pregnancy, or who could become pregnant, and for their support networks.

1. The Core Science of Alcohol Exposure

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is a diagnostic term used to describe the lifelong, brain and body-based disability caused by prenatal exposure to alcohol (PAE). In Te Ao Māori, this is often understood through the lens of Te Iho Tātai-ā-Rongo.

Key Concept	Explanation
Alcohol is a Teratogen	Alcohol (ethanol) is a chemical known to cause severe developmental harm.
Pēpi Exposure	Alcohol freely crosses the placenta. The developing pēpi baby cannot process it, causing it to damage developing brain cells and tissues.
Neuronal Migration	Alcohol 'interrupts the migration of neurons'—the process where brain cells move to their designated places. This is why the brain 'wasn't quite wired' for some tasks. ^[1]
Paternal Factors	A male's health and drinking prior to conception matter. Alcohol can leave an 'epigenetic signature' on sperm, affecting pēpi overall resilience. ^[2]
Invisible Disability	Most people with FASD do not have visible facial features. The severity of the brain damage cannot be "seen."

The Lifelong Impact of FASD: FASD primarily affects the brain's function, but as a whole-body disability, it also impacts the entire central nervous system and physical development. This leads to complex challenges in 'Executive Function' (planning, judgement), 'Learning and Memory' (retaining instructions), and 'Social Skills', alongside various lifelong physical health needs and sensory sensitivities.

2. The Best-Practice Health Message

Global and Aotearoa New Zealand health advice is clear and consistent: **No amount of alcohol is safe** during any stage of pregnancy.

When is Alcohol Unsafe?	Why is it Important to Act Now?
No Safe Amount/Time	There is no known safe amount or safe time during pregnancy to consume alcohol. Alcohol is unsafe at every stage , including before a pregnancy is confirmed.
The Unplanned Pregnancy Risk	Approximately half of all pregnancies are unplanned. If you are sexually active and not using effective contraception, an alcohol-free lifestyle is the safest choice.
Whole-Whānau Goal	An alcohol-free pregnancy is most successful as a 'whole-whānau' journey. Partners are encouraged to quit alongside the pregnant person.

If You Have Been Drinking Before You Knew You Were Pregnant: Do not panic. Most alcohol-exposed pregnancies do not result in FASD. However, the most important action you can take to protect your pēpi is to **stop drinking immediately**. It is never too late to improve your baby's health, as the brain develops throughout all nine months.



Factors that Influence Risk (Not an Excuse to Drink): The chance of a child developing FASD is influenced by the Dose and Pattern of alcohol consumed (binge drinking is higher risk), the Timing of Exposure, the mother and baby’s | pēpi unique genetic factors and metabolism, and the mother’s overall health, stress, and nutrition.

3. Holistic Care, Cultural Context, and Support

Strengths-Based Support: Healthcare providers offer confidential, non-judgemental care. Sharing your journey honestly ensures your pēpi gets the best start. Reaching out for support is a sign of courage and love.

- **Essential Nutrients:** Beyond abstinence, excellent nutrition supports development. Key nutrients include Folic Acid, Iodine, Iron, Omega-3s, and **Choline** (recommended through the first year of the pēpi’s life to support ongoing brain growth).
- **Emerging Research:** Choline is showing promising results for brain structure and attention. Zinc & Nicotinamide are being studied for counteracting cellular damage. Other studies suggest Vitamin D and Magnesium may help support 'neuro-protection' and central nervous system resilience if exposure has occurred.
- **Alcohol and Breastfeeding:** The safest choice is to avoid alcohol while breastfeeding. Alcohol passes freely into breastmilk and can affect a baby's sleep and brain development. If you choose to drink, wait at least 2–3 hours per standard drink before feeding.

Crucial Caveat: Some recent research is exploring how supplements may help lessen (mitigate) the impact *if* alcohol exposure has occurred but
Supplements are NOT a substitute for abstinence.

The Impact of Other Substances: Using multiple substances (nicotine, cannabis, etc.) alongside alcohol significantly compounds the harm to the developing brain and body. Holistic support is available to address all substance use challenges.

4. Where to Find Help Now (Free and Confidential)

Choosing connection over isolation is an act of strength. If you are having difficulty stopping drinking alcohol once you know you are pregnant, reach out today for confidential support.

Service	Contact Details	What they Offer
Alcohol Drug Helpline (24/7)	Call 0800 787 797 or Text 868	Immediate support, information, and connections to local services, including Kaupapa Māori and Pasifika services.
Specialist Maternal Support	Ask your Midwife or GP for a referral.	Pregnancy and Parenting Service (PPS) offers dedicated, holistic, woman-centred support for pregnant women and new parents dealing with substance use challenges.

The Power of Openness: Sharing your experience ensures you receive comprehensive, holistic care now. It also secures the possibility of an early diagnosis and lifelong intervention for your child should developmental challenges arise later, as **early intervention dramatically improves life outcomes for people with FASD.**

Medical Disclaimer

This summary is for educational purposes only and is not medical advice. Every pregnancy and pēpi is unique. Please consult your GP, midwife, or a healthcare professional for advice specific to your health needs or before starting any supplements.

