



FASD-CAN

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder
Care Action Network

FASD-CAN AOTEAROA INFORMATION SHEET

FASD and Epigenetics:

What Pāpā, Fathers and Partners Need to Know

Welcoming a new pēpi (baby) into the world is an exciting time for the whole whānau. It is a journey that starts well before a pregnancy is confirmed. While we often talk about the health of the hapū māmā (the pregnant person), modern research shows that the health and wellbeing of the biological sperm contributor is also important for giving the baby the best start in life.

The Core Message: A healthy pregnancy is not just the responsibility of the person carrying the baby; it is a collective effort. Supporting a healthy conception and a substance-free pregnancy is an investment in the lifelong potential of the pēpi.

What is Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder?

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is a term used to describe a range of permanent conditions that can happen if a developing baby is exposed to alcohol before birth. FASD affects both the brain and the body. Because we know that alcohol can affect development at any stage, there is no safe amount, no safe type, and no safe time to drink alcohol during pregnancy. And as FASD is caused by alcohol exposure in the womb, the health of the sperm at the moment of conception helps set the "starting instructions" for a baby's development. Research now shows that lifestyle choices made by a biological sperm contributor—especially regarding alcohol and other substances—impact the quality of these instructions.

A Shared Biological Responsibility

Traditionally, health advice has focused almost exclusively on the pregnant person carrying the baby avoiding alcohol, but recent research highlights that planning for the health and wellbeing of a pēpi is a shared responsibility with the biological sperm contributor. We used to think that sperm only carried a basic 'blueprint' of DNA. We now know that it is a much more active messenger. It carries 'starting instructions' that tell a baby's genes how to function and grow.

Lifestyle choices - especially around alcohol, smoking, and stress - can change these instructions. This is often called 'epigenetics'. Think of it like a computer program: the DNA 'code' stays the same, but alcohol can act like a 'smudge on the manual', changing how the baby's body reads those instructions. When the sperm contributor is healthy and substance-free in the months before conception, they are helping to ensure these 'biological switches' are set in a way that supports the baby's best potential. Shared health is whānau health.

Key Insight: A Shared Biological Journey

Healthy beginnings for pēpi are not just about the environment inside the womb, but the quality of the genetic building blocks provided by both biological parents.

The 90-Day Opportunity: A 'Golden Window'

One of the most encouraging pieces of news from recent research is that these biological instructions are not permanent. While the DNA itself stays the same, the 'biological switches' are updated every time new sperm is made.

The 3-month lead-up to conception is a 'golden window' for the sperm contributor to improve their health. It takes about 74 days for new sperm to be produced, and roughly 90 days (three months) for them to fully mature. By choosing to stop drinking or using other substances during this time, a person can perform a 'biological reset'. This ensures that the seed used at conception has developed in the healthiest possible environment securing the best start for baby.



Key Insight: The 90-Day Opportunity for a Proactive Reset

The 3-month lead-up to conception is a "golden window" for sperm contributors to improve their health. Because sperm takes about 90 days to produce and mature, every 3 months represents a proactive reset opportunity. The choices made today shape the health of the pēpi tomorrow.

Practical Steps for a Healthy Start

1. Planning for conception

If you are thinking about starting or growing your whānau, the biological sperm contributor can take these proactive steps:

- **The three-month reset:** Aim for at least three months of being alcohol-free before conception. This is the most critical step to protect the 'instruction manual' inside the sperm.
- **Nutrition as support:** Eating well helps 'repair' the sperm. Aim for foods rich in healthy fats and vitamins, such as avocados, nuts, seeds, and oily fish (like salmon or sardines). These provide the essential building blocks the sperm needs to develop.
- **Keep cool:** Avoid excessive heat exposure (like long soaks in hot tubs or resting a laptop directly on your lap) as heat can temporarily reduce the quality of the sperm.
- **Managing stress:** High stress can affect the hormones needed for reproductive health. Finding ways to relax—whether through karakia, mindfulness, or time in nature—helps ensure a healthy start.
- **Reviewing medications:** If you are taking regular medication, have a supportive chat with your doctor. Staying medically stable is a vital part of a healthy environment for your pēpi.

2. Supporting the pregnancy

Once a pregnancy has begun, the role of a partner and whānau remains vital:

- **Social modelling:** The easiest way to help hapū māmā stay alcohol-free is to stop drinking alongside them. It removes temptation and ensures the healthy choice is the default for both partners.
- **A safe environment:** Making sure the home is free from smoke and vaping is crucial. Second-hand exposure to chemicals is a known risk for a developing baby.

What if the Pregnancy wasn't Planned?

If a pregnancy has already begun and you didn't have a three-month lead-in time, **the best time to start is today**. While the pre-conception window is ideal, your health and support right now are what matter most. Stopping alcohol and other drug use immediately—regardless of whether you are the biological parent—provides the essential support the pregnant person needs to maintain a sober pregnancy. It gives your pēpi a healthier environment from this point forward.

Understanding Risk and Resilience

It is common to look at the past and say, 'My father drank and I turned out fine.' While humans are very resilient, modern science is about 'optimal outcomes'. We now have information that previous generations didn't have. Choosing a substance-free period is not a judgement on the past; it is a choice to use the best information available today to give a baby the healthiest possible start.

Where to Find Support

Changing habits is an act of real strength. If you find it hard to stop, confidential help is available:

- **Alcohol & Drug Helpline:** 0800 787 797 (Free, 24/7).
- **Need to Talk? (Mental Health Helpline):** Text or call 1737 (Free, 24/7).
- **FASD-CAN NZ:** For whānau-focused information and local support.

The Bottom Line: Giving a baby the best start is a team effort. When the pregnant person, biological sperm contributor, partners and whānau work together, they build a foundation of wellbeing for the whole whānau.

This information reflects the research and best practice as of 2026. Whānau are encouraged to stay informed as our understanding of health and development continues to grow.

For more detailed information on this topic and for research references used in the preparation of this information sheet, see our expanded website resource.

