



What is fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD)?

FASD is the result of **prenatal alcohol exposure**. This disorder is the **leading preventable cause** of birth defects, developmental disorders and intellectual impairment in unborn children. Scientific studies reveal that there is no safe level of alcohol consumption during pregnancy.

Alcohol and pregnancy: a complex problem

Drinking alcohol during pregnancy is **toxic** for the fetus (via the placenta).

Its effects on the fetus are **unpredictable, variable and permanent**.

FASD is

- **difficult to diagnose**
- **little known**
- **often confused with other diagnoses**, such as oppositional disorder, attention deficit disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADD/ADHD)



The costs associated with FASD are high, both for the families and society. They are estimated at **\$24,000 annually, per person affected**.¹

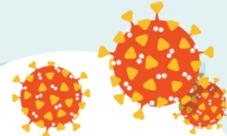
Alcohol and women in Quebec

- **80%** of women aged 12 and over in Quebec drink alcohol and nearly **50%** of them drink regularly.³
- **29%** of women aged 18-34 years drink alcohol excessively (4 glasses or more on a single occasion).⁴

Concerning data on FASD

The ASPQ-Léger survey on alcohol, pregnancy and FASD (summer 2020)⁵ indicates that:

- **64%** of female adolescents, **50%** of women in Quebec and **28%** of pregnant women do not know about FASD.
- Pregnant women aged 18-24 years are more likely to maintain their alcohol consumption during pregnancy.
- In nearly **50%** of cases, the matter of alcohol consumption during pregnancy was not addressed by professionals while following the pregnancy (physician, midwife or doula).
- A WHO study conducted in Toronto by Dr. Popova (2018) indicated that the prevalence of FASD is likely to range between **2%** and **3%** among children.⁶

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- **8%** of pregnant women indicated that their alcohol consumption had increased during the pandemic, with the lockdown.

FASD: more talk, more action

Even today, pregnant women are **not being given a clear and consistent message** about abstaining from alcohol during pregnancy, either from health professionals or their friends and family.⁷

The public health notice (2016) from the Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux (MSSS) publicizes this message in a consistent, non-blaming manner.⁸

“If you are pregnant or plan to become pregnant, don’t take risks, don’t drink alcohol.”

Recommendations for ensuring effective information and awareness-building

For health professionals

- **Inform and raise awareness** among all pregnant women, their family and friends and the general public about the risks of drinking alcohol during pregnancy.
- **Use the public health notice** issued by the MSSS⁸ about abstaining from alcohol during pregnancy and the **3 videos presenting Charly’s challenges**.
- **Listen attentively and take a delicate and empathetic approach**.
- **Involve the pregnant woman’s friends or family** so that the onus is not entirely on her.
- **Provide appropriate and easily accessible resources** to pregnant women who need help to reduce/stop their alcohol consumption (e.g. addiction rehabilitation centres, alternative therapies to minimize stress and fatigue).



For elected officials and administrators

- Provide systematic **FASD training** in the curricula of future health and social services professionals and as part of the continuing education programs provided by professional orders and associations. This would give future healthcare providers the knowledge and awareness to detect and prevent this disorder, and to assist those affected by it.
- **Educate** health professionals about FASD **to ensure better prevention** (awareness campaigns, mandatory continuous training on FASD, etc.).
- **Build on** the best prevention practices that have been evaluated and instituted in other provinces. Based on the Canadian Alcohol Policy Evaluation (CAPE, 2017),⁹ for Quebec:
 - ❑ In all locations where alcohol is sold for take-out or on-site consumption, including Société des alcools du Québec (SAQ) outlets, **disseminate** messages about avoiding alcohol during pregnancy.
 - ❑ **Use** a range of media platforms to communicate these messages.
 - ❑ **Impose** statutory requirements on manufacturers to affix better labels on alcohol containers, including messages about avoiding alcohol during pregnancy.

¹⁻²⁻³⁻⁴⁻⁷ État des connaissances sur le Trouble du spectre de l'alcoolisation foetale, ASPQ, 2020, pp. 5-6-15-24

⁵ ASPQ-Léger ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION, PREGNANCY and FASD survey (2020), conducted among pregnant women, women who recently gave birth and female adolescents in Quebec

⁶ World Health Organization International Study on the Prevalence of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD): Canadian Component <https://www.camh.ca/-/media/files/pdfs---reports-and-books---research/who-fasd-report-english-april2018-pdf.pdf?la=en&hash=8173467B2A9D25FB2D503D21F6B-D83C500999068%208publications.msss.gouv.qc.ca/msss/document-001763/>

⁸ publications.msss.gouv.qc.ca/msss/document-001763/

⁹ <https://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/cisur/assets/docs/report-cape-qc-en.pdf>