

## UNDERSTANDING FASD

# What is Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder?

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is a diagnostic term referring to the range of physical, mental and behavioral problems that can occur in an individual who has been exposed to alcohol before birth.



It is not always apparent that an individual has FASD. Many individuals with the condition have significant talents and cognitive strengths.

## Impacts of FASD

FASD is lifelong, and often invisible and can impact on growth, behavior and cognition, including:

- General intelligence
- Language  
Understanding information and expressing oneself
- Basic literacy and numeracy skills
- Memory  
Including the ability to learn and retain both visual and verbal information over time
- Attention  
Focusing, resisting distractions, switching between things and multi-tasking
- Complex thinking skills  
Decision-making, planning and organising, controlling impulses, initiating and completing tasks
- Regulation of emotions
- Adaptive behaviour  
The ability to live independently in a safe and socially responsible manner and to manage both simple and complex tasks of daily living

FASD can also affect internal body organs, cause sensory issues and lead to delayed growth. Some people with FASD may have facial features such as thin upper lips, small eyes and smoothed ridge between the upper lip and nose.

FASD is a spectrum disorder in which the range and severity of symptoms will differ from one person to the next and is also likely to vary throughout the lifespan.

It is important to recognise and accurately diagnose FASD as it can affect all domains of life including academic and occupational achievement, social and emotional functioning, activities of daily living and coping skills.

# What is Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder?

## Prevalence of FASD

**FASD exists universally and crosses all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups in society.**

Global rates of FASD have been estimated to be about 7.7 per 1,000 population. The prevalence of FASD in Australia is unknown but it is estimated that up to 0.68 per 1,000 persons in Australia have FASD.

Rates of FASD are estimated to be higher among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Indigenous Australians) compared to other Australians, with incidence rates estimated to range between 2.0 to 9.3 per 1,000 births. In some remote Indigenous communities, up to 194.4 per 1000 individuals have been reported to have FASD.

Reasons why FASD is present at higher rates in Indigenous Australian communities are complex. It is possible that the condition is more easily recognized in those communities where it tends to be more concentrated as opposed to the wider Australian population where it may be more dispersed.

Excessive drinking in Indigenous Australian communities is not more widespread than in non-Indigenous communities, and may be a product of socioeconomic, cultural and historical factors including dispossession, transgenerational trauma and geographical isolation.

FASD affects all ethnicities, racial and socioeconomic groups. Any increased prevalence in Indigenous Australian communities is best understood in the context of past historical, social and geographical factors that have affected mental health and community cohesion.

**0.68 / 1,000**  
within the general  
Australian population

**2 – 9.3 / 1,000**  
within the Indigenous  
Australian population

up to  
**194.4 / 1,000**  
in some remote  
Indigenous Australian  
communities



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