Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS)

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) is a problem caused by the exposure of alcohol to the fetus (unborn child). A syndrome is a collection of symptoms and medical problems. FAS is a life-long problem that has a variety of mental and physical issues. It is one of the few known preventable causes of mental retardation.

CAUSES

FAS is caused by drinking alcohol during pregnancy. Alcohol taken in by a pregnant woman gets into the blood stream of the fetus. This causes damage to the developing brain and other organs. Alcohol is damaging at any time during pregnancy. The more and the earlier alcohol is drunk, the worse the effects on the fetus.

It appears that no amount of alcohol is safe when pregnant. Alcohol should be avoided in:

- All stages of pregnancy.
- Women of childbearing age who are trying to get pregnant or who do not use birth control. Drinking alcohol during the early stages of pregnancy (before a woman knows she is pregnant) is not safe for the fetus.

SYMPTOMS

Signs and symptoms of FAS can vary from one child to another. They depend on how much and the timing of damage to the fetus. FAS children may have any of the following:

- Slow to achieve normal expected skills (*developmental del*ay).
- Mental retardation.
- Abnormal facial features.
- Slow physical growth.
- Small size at birth.
- Small head size.
- Sleep and sucking disturbances in infancy.
- Unusual fussiness in infancy.
- Heart defects.
- Joint problems.
- Problems with learning, memory, attention span, communication, vision, and/or hearing. These problems often lead to difficulties in school and problems getting along with others.
- Poor coordination and motor skills.
- Hyperactive behavior and anxiety.
- Poor reasoning and judgment skills.

DIAGNOSIS

Diagnosis of FAS is made based on the physical exam of the child. Other tests may be done to look for problems with the heart and other organs.

TREATMENT

There is no specific treatment for FAS. Medicines may be used for attention span or behavior problems. Vision and hearing testing may be needed. Speech therapy may help. Heart defects (if any) may need correction. Counseling to handle behavioral problems may be needed.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

A child who is diagnosed early in life can be placed in appropriate educational classes and given access to social services that can help the child and his or her family. Children with FAS who receive special education are more likely to achieve their developmental and educational potential.

If your child has behavioral problems, some of the following may be helpful:

- Seek a support group of other parents with children with FAS or behavior problems.
- Keep consistent daily routines that your child can rely upon.
- Keep clear rules and limits. Be consistent in applying consequences for not following the rules.
- Be brief in directions and instructions.
- Reinforce positive behavior with praise and rewards.
- Prevent other children taking advantage of your child.

A home life that is structured and family members who are caring can help prevent the problems a FAS child may have as they grow into adulthood. These potential problems include:

- Chemical dependency.
- Dropping out of school.
- Encounters with the juvenile justice system.

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You are having problems coping with your child's behavior.
- Your child has new hearing or vision problems.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- Your child has a convulsion (*seizure*).

PREVENTION

FAS and other prenatal alcohol-related conditions are completely preventable:

- Do not drink any amount of alcohol while pregnant or trying to become pregnant.
- If you are unable to stop drinking contact your caregiver or local Alcoholics Anonymous or local alcohol treatment center.
- The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has a Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator. This locator helps people find drug and alcohol treatment programs in their area.
- If you are sexually active and not using an effective form of birth control, you should not drink alcohol. You could be pregnant and not know it for several weeks or more.

The father's role is also important in helping the woman abstain from drinking alcohol during pregnancy. He can encourage her abstinence from alcohol by:

- Avoiding social situations that involve drinking.
- Abstaining from alcohol himself.

Document Released: 03/09/2004 Document Re-Released: 01/09/2011
ExitCare® Patient Information ©2011 ExitCare, LLC.