

International Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) Day

Sep 6, 2017



The Foundation for Alcohol Related Research (FARR) is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year. Since the first Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) prevalence study in 1997, FARR has done 12 community prevalence studies in Gauteng, Northern, Eastern and Western Cape Provinces, reporting rates ranging from 27/1000 (2.7%) to 282/1000 (28%). South Africa has the highest reported FASD rates in the world.

On 9 September 2017, International FASD Day will be commemorated world wide. The first International FASD Day took place on 9 September 1999. Across the globe groups of people get together at 09h00 on 9 September to share a FASD prevention message. At 09h08 one minute silence is observed, with the participants reflecting on people who are living with FASD and their caregivers.

At 09h09 a bell is rung to ceremonially break the silence, thereby encouraging community members, family and friends to share the FASD prevention message and to support pregnant women to abstain from alcohol use during pregnancy. The number 9 is a reminder of the importance of 9 alcohol-free pregnancy months. The message for this year's International FASD Day is therefore: "No amount of alcohol is safe during pregnancy."

This year FARR will have a variety of International FASD Day events on all our project sites in the Free State, Western, Eastern and Northern Cape Provinces. Continuing to emphasis the number 9, sponsors, service providers, community members and clients are going to participate in awareness walks, ranging from 900 meters (to accommodate pregnant women) to 9 km in the various project areas. FASD awareness knots will be distributed to be worn as a reminder of our joint responsibility to protect the unborn children in the community from the harmful effects of alcohol.

FASD is caused when an unborn baby (fetus) is exposed to alcohol. The teratogenic (toxic) effect of alcohol causes permanent, irreversible damage to the developing cells of the unborn baby. Since the baby's brain starts developing soon after conception, the brain of the fetus is especially vulnerable to the damaging effects of alcohol. For this reason, children with FASD, are born with permanent brain damage. It is however important to note that any other organ of the unborn baby can also be affected. Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) is the most severe form of FASD, but there are a variety of other conditions as well.

In South Africa approximately 78% of pregnancies are unplanned. As a result of this, women often do not realise that they are pregnant and therefore continue to use alcohol, especially during the first trimester (3 months of pregnancy). This is a very vulnerable time for the fetus as most of the organs develop during this period. Due to a variety of reasons, such as unplanned pregnancies, limited resources, attitudinal challenges and lack of knowledge, women often visit antenatal services very late during their pregnancies and therefore further delay the possibility of getting information about FASD and the necessary support.

Due to the very high prevalence rates in South Africa, FASD is a public health concern in many communities, but unfortunately very little, if any, education is given to students in the health, education and social work sectors. To successfully prevent this condition, it is essential to raise awareness in the general public, but professionals should receive the necessary training and skills to do diagnose and manage FASD and to implement awareness and prevention strategies.

During the past year there has been an increase in international concern regarding the stigmatization of women of childbearing age and mothers of children with FASD. It is important to note that women often experience pressure from their partners, family and friends to use alcohol during pregnancy. Incorrect and misleading messages from health staff regarding the effect of prenatal alcohol use, cause confusion and often contradicts the important message that no amount of alcohol is safe during pregnancy. In FARR's studies in South Africa this was repeatedly found. Women also report that they often used alcohol as a form of self-medication to alleviate stress and to escape from daily hardships.

In the areas where FARR is operational, pregnant women are invited to enrol in Healthy Mother Healthy Baby Programmes. These programmes are available to all pregnant women, irrespective whether they use alcohol or

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not. The aim of the programme is to provide pregnant women with information and the necessary skills to make informed decisions regarding their own health and the health of their unborn babies. The ultimate goal is to support them to have healthier pregnancies and healthier babies. Women who are using alcohol receive the necessary guidance and support in this regard. The programme is implemented with the support of the local Health Departments and is a huge success.

FARR also implements a variety of awareness programmes and offer training to educators, social workers, health professionals and students.

For more information about FASD, FARR's research, projects and/or the International FASD Day events in the above-mentioned provinces, please contact the FARR CEO at 021-6862646 or on 083 275 0202. Please visit the FARR web page www.farrsa.org.za or FARR's facebook.

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