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There may soon be a cure for foetal alcohol syndrome

South Africa has one of the highest rates of foetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) in the world, with a prevalence of over 12% in some areas.

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Foetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) is a completely avoidable disability caused by the consumption of alcohol during pregnancy; it is the main cause of severe mental disabilities and stunted physical growth in babies. An alarming fact is that South Africa has one of the highest rates in the world, with a prevalence as high as 12.2% in some areas.

New research offers hope

While the effects have a debilitating impact on the child, animal research may have yielded a potential treatment for foetal alcohol spectrum disorder.

Two common medications reversed memory and learning problems in rats exposed to alcohol while in the womb, according to researchers at Northwestern University in Chicago. "We've shown you can interfere after the damage from alcohol is done. That's huge," study senior author Eva Redei said in a university news release.

The consumption of alcohol has a damaging effect on the foetus, resulting in several birth defects such as:

- Characteristic facial features including smaller eyes, a flattened nasal bridge and a thin upper lip
- Delayed development and mental handicap
- Physical growth deficiencies
- Heart defects

Currently, there is no treatment for foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, added Redei, a professor of psychiatric diseases affecting children and adolescents. For 10 days after birth, rat pups that were exposed to alcohol in the womb were given either the hormone thyroxine or the drug metformin.

Thyroxine is reduced in pregnant women who drink and in infants with foetal alcohol spectrum disorder. Metformin is an insulin sensitising drug that lowers blood sugar levels, which are higher in alcoholics, the study authors explained.

When they reached adulthood, the treated rats were tested and compared to rats that had been exposed to alcohol in the womb but not given either drug. The treated rats had no memory or learning problems, according to the study. The results were published in the journal *Molecular Psychiatry*.

Abstinence still best prevention

"There are women who drink before they are aware that they are pregnant, and women who do not stop drinking during their pregnancy," Redei said. "These women still can help their children's



There may be hope for kids with foetal alcohol syndrome. (iStock) ~

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