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Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders: Update & Expert Q&A

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Prenatal alcohol exposure is the most common preventable cause of developmental disabilities and birth defects.¹ The fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) represent the range of cognitive, physical, emotional, and behavioral abnormalities that can result from in utero exposure to alcohol. These disorders include fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS), partial FAS, alcohol-related birth defects, and alcohol-related neurodevelopmental disorder. Additionally, neurobehavioral disorder associated with prenatal alcohol exposure was introduced in the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 2013 as a “condition in need of further study.”²

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and expert collaborators previously developed diagnostic guidelines for FAS, and experts from numerous US universities, in conjunction with the National Institutes of Health National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, published guidelines for all FASD in 2016.^{3,4} Prevalence estimates of FASD in the United States and some western European countries have been placed as high as 5%, although rates have varied widely across studies because of the divergent methodologies used.⁵

The authors of a new systematic review and meta-analysis published in *JAMA Pediatrics* noted the importance of establishing updated prevalence rates to inform awareness, prevention, and treatment efforts.⁶ In their analysis of data from 24 studies involving a total of 1416 children and youth with FASD (ages 0-16.4 years), they found the following prevalence rates:



“More work on the supports needed and challenges faced by individuals with FASD in adulthood would be extremely helpful.”