

## INTERNATIONAL FASD DAY 9 SEPTEMBER

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# No alcohol is safe at any time during pregnancy

WHEN dealing with a public health concern such as Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), it is easy to become overwhelmed by the scope of the problem.

There is no doubt that FASD is a significant and pressing concern that makes it inevitable to speak about the related problems. It is, however, essential to also acknowledge the progress made since the first community research and intervention in 1997.

Compared to the first international FASD Day in 1999 that took place in Cape Town with nine attendees, the number of people willing to help and share the message has grown exponentially. Government, NGOs and civil society have come together to bring about meaningful change in communities. In 1997, FASD was an unknown condition in our country. Since the inception of the Foundation for Alcohol Related Research (FARR) in 1997, together with the dedicated efforts of a handful of NGOs, there has been an increase

in knowledge about FASD. There is still much more to be done, as many community members still do not have access to information, services and support.

This year, FARR is encouraging everyone to go "beyond all limits" in supporting, caring for and loving those affected.

South Africa has the highest FASD rate in the world. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates the global FASD prevalence rate to be less than 1%. FARR's research in South Africa has reported rates as high as 282/1000 (28%) in the Northern Cape, and areas in the Western Cape with rates as high as 310/1000 (31%) – according to the FASER-SA report.

FASD can only be caused by alcohol exposure during pregnancy. The harm that we can avert by preventing alcohol exposure in pregnancy includes organ damage and brain damage, which leads to lifelong learning and behavioural challenges. Therefore, our message is "no alcohol is safe at any

time during pregnancy".

Even small amounts of alcohol have the potential to cause harm.

To spread this message and to prevent FASD, FARR has completed 18 FASD prevalence studies and currently has 13 community projects situated in the Free State, Western Cape, Eastern Cape and Northern Cape. The training academy operates nationally. FARR supports pregnant mothers through its Healthy Mother Healthy Baby programme, and facilitates intervention and support initiatives for special needs learners, adolescents and senior citizens.

FARR also offers training and awareness initiatives to communities and professionals to provide them with the necessary knowledge and skills to address challenges caused by alcohol.

It is tempting to make alcohol use during pregnancy solely the expectant mother's responsibility; however, that ignores the reality faced by millions of South Africans. If children as young as eight are

using alcohol and girls younger than 14 are falling pregnant, we must ask ourselves if we are doing enough.

"Just say no" is a catchy slogan, but it means little to someone battling with substance abuse, facing gender-based violence, unemployment, poverty and more.

We need to take action in South Africa in raising awareness. We call on all to reflect on this and share the message "no alcohol is safe during pregnancy" – not only on International FASD Day, but continuously. Inform and support pregnant women in your immediate circle of friends and family.

On September 9, commit yourself to spreading awareness about FASD and go "beyond all limits" to love and support mothers-to-be during their pregnancies. Understand their struggles and stand by them, this is how you do harm reduction.

**Dr Leana Olivier**  
FARR CEO and spokesperson

### FASD PREVALENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

The World Health Organization estimates the global FASD prevalence rate to be approximately 15 per 1000 live births (1.5%). In South Africa, research done by the Foundation for Alcohol Related Research (FARR) in 5 of the 9 provinces, revealed rates as high as 282 per 1000 live births in some communities in the Northern Cape Province. The Western Cape Province has areas with rates as high as 250 per 1000 live births (25%) (FASER-SA report).



A person diagnosed with FASD always has some form of brain damage presenting in developmental delays, learning barriers and behavioural problems. The person might also have other organ damage.

#### WHAT ARE SOME SYMPTOMS OF FASD?

Children with FASD often find it difficult to adjust and progress at school. This is because they might have problems with short-term memory, short attention span, hyperactivity, abstract thinking, understanding cause and effect of decisions and actions, etc.

Teenagers with FASD regularly present with heightened risk-taking behaviour; not fully realising the possible outcomes of their actions.



As they frequently experience failure and negative feedback, children with FASD often have low self-esteem, give up trying, and drop out of school early.

Adults living with FASD might have low educational levels (due to early school drop-out); coupled with their FASD-related challenges, they find it difficult to get a job and stay in employment.

FASD occurs in any cultural, religious and socio-economic group.



#### WHY

##### 9 SEPTEMBER?

The symbolism of 9 is very important, as a woman is ideally pregnant for about 9 months. The number 9 is therefore fully utilised: the 9th day of the 9th month at 9am.

#### FASD PREVENTION MESSAGE:

No amount of alcohol is safe any time during pregnancy.

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## Uniting to prevent Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder

SOUTH Africa reports some of the highest rates of alcohol consumption during pregnancy, resulting in a notable prevalence of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD).

FASD is caused by prenatal alcohol use and refers to abnormalities in the foetus (unborn baby). The World Health Organization estimates that the national FASD prevalence rate in South Africa might

be as high as 11%. The global rate is less than 1%. Based on this statistic, an estimated five million South Africans might have FASD.

To address this national primary health crisis, Aware.org and the Foundation for Alcohol Related Research (FARR) have a long-standing relationship that empowers expectant mothers and communities with infor-

mation to make healthy and informed choices. In addition, the partnership provides services to help women have healthier and alcohol-free pregnancies with no substance abuse. Various other community interventions and the training of professional service providers also aim to assist communities in preventing babies being born with FASD.

"I was unaware of how

much alcohol could harm my child until my first baby was born with severe Foetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS). My (first) child faced numerous health issues. Thankfully, the Healthy Mother Healthy Baby (HMHB) programme prevented me from drinking during my second pregnancy. He's now a healthy and typical child. I've quit alcohol altogether. I'm overjoyed

for my healthy child, yet deeply saddened by what my first one had to go through," said a beneficiary of the HMHB programme.

Every year on September 9, International FASD Awareness Day is observed in countries around the world. FASD is a lifelong, irreversible condition – but it is also 100% preventable. No amount of alcohol is safe

to use during pregnancy.

"South Africa's high rate of FASD is a concern that requires collective action," says Carmen Mohapi, managing director of Aware.org.

"Through our partnership with FARR, we aim to amplify awareness about the risks associated with prenatal alcohol consumption and advocate for a healthier future for our communities."

## South Africa Wine supports a responsible drinking culture

ALCOHOL abuse and related harm is a world-wide problem that is also evident in South Africa.

South Africa Wine, and the wine industry members it represents, embraces its responsibility to change this narrative by creating a socially responsible drinking culture. This can be done through a long-term strategy of a range of targeted interventions, as well as through social upliftment work done through the wine industry.

As a member of the Association for Alcohol Responsibility and Education (Aware.org), South Africa Wine wants to enable and facilitate this by reducing the harmful

consumption of alcohol through public education and awareness, evidence-based targeted interventions, and effective partnering and relationship management. This will ensure compliance with internationally-recognised industry commitments and good governance practices, while guiding South Africans to make healthier life choices.

Aware.org works closely with the Foundation for Alcohol-Related Research (FARR) to conduct research on FASD in vulnerable communities, and co-ordinates training and support programmes in high-risk communities

in the Free State, Western Cape and Eastern Cape. These programmes are aimed at pregnant women as well as health professionals, caregivers, partners, families of pregnant women, and members of the selected communities – particularly adolescent girls.

Through the membership, South Africa Wine supports Aware.org to enable FARR to provide employment in the selected communities, conduct a FASD prevalence study, recruit pregnant women into the programme and conduct motivational interviews with them, while also providing educational ses-

sions for various groups.

FARR has pioneered a successful FASD response that combines research, community awareness, facilitating preventive work with pregnant women, and educating other significant groups. The organisation has also developed its own programmes to empower health workers to educate their patients and communities on FASD and sober pregnancies.

South Africa Wine, through its people and skills development department, also supports industry initiatives and programmes that educate the industry on topics related to alcohol awareness and

the risks of FAS/FASD. The Alcohol Awareness Skills programme, facilitated through Apeirogon Youth Development, kicked off in September in the Hemel and Aarde Valley, as well as in Stellenbosch. This programme focuses on developing cognisance of the health risks and consequences of alcohol consumption as well as the role alcohol plays in our lives, alcohol-related risks, alcohol disorders and how alcohol affects the body.

South Africa Wine takes the health and safety of the people and communities working throughout the wine and brandy value chain seriously. It remains committed to creating an

environment in which people can enjoy products responsibly.

Although the alcohol industry is highly regulated, there is, unfortunately, a big challenge with illegal products that also find their way to the most vulnerable communities – posing a huge risk. The wine industry continues to co-operate with the law enforcement authorities to try and curb it.

If people are our future, awareness and prevention become key to enjoying wine responsibly.

For more information, contact South Africa Wine on 021 276 0430 or visit [www.sawine.co.za](http://www.sawine.co.za)