

BRANDSTORIES >>>

# INTERNATIONAL FOETAL ALCOHOL SPECTRUM DISORDER DAY 9 September

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## Aware.org and FARR's partnership targets FASD prevention in SA

SOUTH Africa faces a significant challenge with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) – a condition that is completely preventable yet alarmingly prevalent in the country.

Although research has not been conducted in all 9 provinces, South Africa is estimated to have a national prevalence rate of 11.1% – but rates as high as 31% have been reported, which is the highest reported rate globally.

FASD is caused by alcohol exposure during pregnancy, leading to lifelong physical and cognitive impairments in affected individuals. Despite these severe consequences, the level of awareness about FASD remains inadequate among young people, underage mothers, communities, fathers and health-care providers.

### Support and resources

In response to this crisis, Aware.org has joined forces with the Foundation for Alcohol Related Research (FARR)



to spearhead critical initiatives aimed at preventing FASD. This partnership focuses on educating and equipping society with the knowledge and resources to avoid alcohol use during pregnancy; employing a comprehensive whole-of-society approach.

As part of these efforts, Aware.org and FARR have implemented a hub-and-spoke programme in the Western Cape and Eastern Cape, while also commissioning a FASD prevalence study in the Free State that commenced in 2023 and is still in progress.

These programmes are designed to enhance local capacities to address FASD by providing community-based support and resources to effectively prevent the disorder. The hub-and-spoke model ensures a broad reach for tailored interventions, addressing specific needs within each province.

“Aware.org is committed to addressing the high rate of FASD in South Africa through strategic partnerships like with FARR. Our goal is to one day see that every child has the best possible start in life, free from the harms of prenatal alcohol exposure,” says Mokebe Thulo, CEO at Aware.org.

Dr Leana Olivier, CEO of FARR, highlights the significance of this collaboration. “Through our joint efforts, we are making significant strides in reducing the incidence of FASD. By empowering expectant mothers with the right information and support, we can help prevent this preventable disorder.”

### Healthier future

The impact of these efforts is underscored by the testimony of a beneficiary of the Healthy Mother Healthy Baby (HMHB) programme.

“Through the HMHB programme, my child is now healthy and thriving. 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 the mother.

Together, Aware.org and FARR are dedicated to creating a healthier future for South African communities by raising awareness and preventing the devastating impacts of FASD. Their joint efforts aim not only to reduce the prevalence of FASD, but to also foster a culture of informed decision-making – ensuring that future generations are born free from the consequences of prenatal alcohol exposure. This partnership is a powerful step towards breaking the cycle of FASD and building a brighter, healthier future for all.

## No amount of alcohol is safe during pregnancy

FOETAL Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is caused when an unborn baby or foetus is exposed to alcohol in the womb.

FASD is a great concern globally as well as in South Africa, with many women having unplanned or “surprise” pregnancies that are only confirmed when they are already a few weeks pregnant. If they used alcohol during this period, they would have unknowingly exposed their unborn babies to it.

A mother does not need to be a heavy drinker or an alcoholic to have a child with FASD. Even small amounts of alcohol can potentially harm the unborn baby.

Babies born with FASD have lifelong, irreversible brain damage and often also organ damage. The brain damage might present as learning and behavioural problems.

Due to a lack of proper training and support for educators as well as an inability to meet the needs of these children within the given education system, many learners with FASD drop out of school early. International studies also indicate that people living with FASD are more prone to a variety of chronic health



conditions, including mental health challenges.

In South Africa, there is a total lack of diagnostic and support services. Diagnosing FASD requires a medical examination by a trained clinician, neuro-developmental assessments to exclude any other possible condition, and an in-depth history of the pre and post-natal history of the individual.

Once diagnosed, the individual living with FASD and their family are then faced with very limited, if any, services. Of particular need are supportive services and job opportunities for those older

than 18.

The Foundation for Alcohol Related Research (FARR) is a non-governmental organisation based in Bellville, Cape Town; with 13 project centres in the Free State, Northern Cape, Eastern Cape and Western Cape. FARR has already completed 18 FASD prevalence studies in these provinces and in Gauteng. Extensive community awareness, training, support and prevention services are rendered on all these project sites. The main objectives are to raise awareness and capacitate communities to implement alcohol harm reduction measures in order to decrease the number of babies born with FASD. FARR also trains professionals working in these project areas on how to support individuals with FASD.

There are still many myths around FASD – including that a woman must be an alcoholic to have a child with FASD. Therefore, the prevention message that must be spread is:

No amount of alcohol is safe any time during pregnancy. FASD causes permanent damage, but it is 100% preventable by not drinking alcohol during pregnancy.

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## BASA drives awareness about dangers of underage drinking

SOUTH Africa has one of the highest rates of FASD in the world, which at times is linked to pregnancies that are influenced by underage drinking.

The Enyobeni tavern tragedy in East London, when 21 school children died in a crowded tavern, highlighted the prevalence of this problem.

The Beer Association of SA (BASA) recognises the need to raise awareness among South Africa's youth of the dangers of underage drinking. BASA runs a nationwide series of events at schools throughout the year to drive home messages against alcohol abuse and that “no amount of alcohol is safe during pregnancy”.

This year, BASA has led several impactful initiatives, including a uniform handover at Zenzeleni Primary School and a sanitary drive at

Aurora Girls High School in Gauteng. In August, BASA was hosted at the Siyaphakama Multisport Tournament in Gqeberha involving eight different school teams to promote health and fitness.

BASA has partnered with regulatory authorities such as the JMPD, the Department of Education, National Liquor Traders, SANTACO and other key stakeholders to achieve its goals. In shining the spotlight on FASD and advocating for no underage drinking, as one of the contributing factors to FASD, BASA is on a drive to collaborate with stakeholders that share the vision of having these societal issues eliminated.

BASA CEO Charlene Louw says that high levels of underage drinking and FASD in South Africa reflect a combination of factors – including socio-economic deprivation, hopelessness and ignorance. Implementing prevention strategies during early adolescence is needed to prevent an escalation.

“This is a tragedy, not only for the young people and their babies but for the country. South Africa's economy cannot afford to support victims of FASD who are unable to lead fulfilling lives. We must drive home how important it is that people under 18 do not drink at all, and that people over 18 should only drink responsibly.”

**WHY 9 SEPTEMBER?**  
The symbolism of 9 is very important, as a woman is ideally pregnant for about 9 months. International FASD Day is therefore held on the 9th day of the 9th month every year.

### South Africa Wine champions responsible drinking

ALCOHOL abuse is a global concern – and South Africa is no exception. South Africa Wine recognises its role in addressing this issue and is committed to promoting a responsible drinking culture.

South Africa Wine aims to make a positive impact through targeted interventions and social upliftment initiatives across the wine industry. A proud member of Aware.org, South Africa Wine is dedicated to reducing harmful alcohol consumption through public education, awareness campaigns and partnerships with key organisations. Its efforts align with internationally-recognised industry commitments, ensuring it promotes healthy choices and good governance.

“Creating a responsible drinking culture in South Africa is not just a goal, it's a necessity. By working together with industry leaders like South Africa Wine, we can make a tangible difference in the lives of many, especially in

vulnerable communities,” says Mokebe Thulo, CEO at Aware.org.

One of South Africa Wine's key partnerships is with the Foundation for Alcohol Related Research (FARR), which focuses on addressing FASD in high-risk areas. Through research, training and community programmes, FARR is making strides in preventing FASD and educating communities about the dangers of alcohol during pregnancy.

“South Africa Wine believes the health and safety of those working in the wine and brandy value chains, and their communities, are essential. We are committed to creating an environment where people can enjoy our products responsibly – and awareness and prevention are key to a healthier future,” said South Africa Wine CEO, Rico Basson.

For more information, contact South Africa Wine at 021 276 0430 or visit www.sawine.co.za

### FASD is associated with:

- Behavioural Disabilities
- Cognitive Disabilities
- Physical Disabilities & Birth Defects



Support pregnant woman to have alcohol-free pregnancies!

FASD causes permanent damage but is 100% preventable

aware!org association for alcohol responsibility and education

BEER ASSOCIATION OF SOUTH AFRICA

farr foundation for alcohol related research

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