

## Fetal Alcohol Syndrome

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### Definition/ cut-off value

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) is based on the presence of retarded growth, a pattern of facial abnormalities, and abnormalities of the central nervous system, including mental retardation (1).

Presence of FAS diagnosed by a physician as self reported by applicant/participant/caregiver; or as reported or documented by a physician, or someone working under physician's orders.

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### Participant category and priority level

Category	Priority
Infants	I
Children	III

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### Justification

FAS is a combination of permanent, irreversible birth defects attributable solely to alcohol consumption by the mother during pregnancy. There is no known cure; it can only be prevented (1). Symptoms of FAS may include failure to thrive, a pattern of poor growth throughout childhood and poor ability to suck (for infants). Babies with FAS are often irritable and have difficulty feeding and sleeping.

Lower levels of alcohol use may produce Fetal Alcohol Effects (FAE) or Alcohol Related Birth Defects (ARBD) that can include mental deficit, behavioral problems, and milder abnormal physiological manifestations (2). FAE and ARBD are generally less severe than FAS and their effects are widely variable. Therefore, FAE and ARBD in and of themselves are not considered risks, whereas the risk of FAS is unquestionable.

Identification of FAS is an opportunity to anticipate and act upon the nutritional and educational needs of the child. WIC can provide nutritional foods to help counter the continuing poor growth and undifferentiated malabsorption that appears to be present with FAS. WIC can help caregivers acknowledge that children with FAS often grow steadily but slower than their peers. WIC can also educate the caregiver on feeding, increased calorie needs and maintaining optimal nutritional status of the child.

Alcohol abuse is highly concentrated in some families (3). Drinking, particularly abusive drinking, is often found in families that suffer from a multitude of other social problems (4). A substantial number of FAS children come from families, either immediate or extended, where alcohol abuse is common, even normative. This frequently results in changes of caregivers or foster placements. New caregivers need to be educated on the special and continuing nutritional needs of the child.

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**Justification (cont)** The physical, social, and psychological stresses and the birth of a new baby, particularly one with special needs, places an extra burden upon the recovering woman. This puts the child at risk for poor nutrition and neglect (e.g., the caregiver may forget to prepare food or be unable to adequately provide all the foods necessary for the optimal growth and development of the infant or child.) WIC can provide supplemental foods, nutrition education and referral to medical and social services, which can monitor and provide assistance to the family.

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**Clarifications/  
Guidelines** Before assigning this risk code, be sure the condition is documented on the health history form.

Self-reporting of a diagnosis by a medical professional should not be confused with self-diagnosis, where a person simply claims to have or to have had a medical condition without any reference to professional diagnosis. A self-reported medical diagnosis (“My doctor says that I have/my son or daughter has...” should prompt the CA to validate the presence of the condition by asking more pointed questions related to that diagnosis.

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**References**

1. Clarren, S.K., and Smith, D.W.: The Fetal Alcohol Syndrome; New England Journal of Medicine; May 11, 1978; 298:1063-1067.
2. Jones, K.L., Smith, D.W., Ulleland, C.N., and Streissguth, A.P.: Pattern of Malformation in Offspring of Chronic Alcoholic Mothers. Lancet; Jun 9, 1973; 815:1267-1271.
3. Masis, B., M.D., May, A.: A Comprehensive Local Program for the Prevention of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, Public Health Reports; September-October 1991; 106: 5; pp. 484-489.
4. Lujan, C.C., BeBruyn, L., May, P.A., and Bird, M.E.: Profile of Abuse and Neglected Indian Children in the Southwest; Child Abuse Negligent; 1989; 34: 449-461.
5. Institute of Medicine: Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, Diagnosis, Epidemiology, Prevention and Treatment; 1996.
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