

## Press release

For Release Date: 9/9/2021 (International Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders Awareness Day)

### **International FASD Awareness Day: Support for women to prevent alcohol problems**

#### ***Polish State Agency for Prevention of Alcohol-Related Problems (PARPA) launches website to empower women to stop drinking alcohol in pregnancy, as part of the EU project FAR SEAS***

- European women's rates of drinking and alcohol-related problems have been increasing
- Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) are the leading cause of developmental disability in the western world, and the EU has the world's highest rates of FASD - over 2.5 times the global average
- The EC-funded FAR SEAS Project is piloting a programme in Poland to help pregnant women reduce their drinking and prevent prenatal alcohol exposure and FASD
- The pilot programme, implemented by PARPA, includes a website and online support tool, aimed at helping women to reduce alcohol consumption

Warsaw, Mazovian voivodeship, Poland – A new website ([www.dzieckobezfasd.pl](http://www.dzieckobezfasd.pl)) offering online advice, science-based information and professional support to women who wish to reduce their drinking, is up and running and being promoted on this year's International Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders Awareness Day (9/9/2021) by PARPA, the Polish State Agency for the Prevention of Alcohol-Related Problems. The website and online counselling (contact with a professional) are part of a regional pilot-study within the EC-funded project FAR SEAS ([www.far-seas.eu](http://www.far-seas.eu)).

Although women have traditionally consumed less alcohol than men, this gender gap has shrunk over time, and this appears to be due to women drinking more<sup>1</sup>. This is concerning because biological factors mean that women are at higher risk from alcohol-related harms than men, even with lower levels of drinking. Women are more likely to develop alcohol dependency and liver cirrhosis than men, and 20% of breast cancer mortality in Europe is due to alcohol, with as little as one standard drink per day associated with significantly increased cancer risk.<sup>2</sup> On top of this, women are emerging as one of Big Alcohol's major target groups, with many ad campaigns encouraging women to drink, and even promoting alcohol brands as empowering women or supporting women's rights.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the alcohol harms experienced by all women, of any age or stage in life, drinking during pregnancy poses significant danger to a developing fetus. Drinking during pregnancy is the leading cause of birth defects and child developmental disorders in Europe. Yet studies show that many pregnant women are unaware of the risks, with consumption rates ranging from 25% in Spain to 79% in Ireland and the UK.<sup>4</sup> The adverse effects of drinking during pregnancy may include physical, behavioural and cognitive problems, known collectively as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Slade T, Chapman C, Swift W, *et al.* (2016) Birth cohort trends in the global epidemiology of alcohol use and alcohol-related harms in men and women: systematic review and meta-regression. *BMJ Open* 2016; doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2016-011827

<sup>2</sup> Rehm, J., & Shield, K. D. (2021). Alcohol use and cancer in the European Union. *European addiction research*, 27(1), 1-8. <https://www.karger.com/Article/FullText/507017>

<sup>3</sup> <https://movendi.ngo/news/2020/06/24/how-big-alcohol-converts-women-to-alcohol/>

<sup>4</sup> European Institute of Women's Health, Women and alcohol in the EU <https://eurohealth.ie/women-and-alcohol-in-the-eu/>

<sup>5</sup> Lange, S., Probst, C., Gmel, G., Rehm, J., Burd, L., & Popova, S. (2017). Global prevalence of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder among children and youth: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *JAMA pediatrics*, 171(10), 948-956. [http://alcoholireland.ie/download/publications/jamapediatrics\\_Lange\\_2017\\_oi\\_170049.pdf](http://alcoholireland.ie/download/publications/jamapediatrics_Lange_2017_oi_170049.pdf)

“The long-term difficulties that children and adults with FASD face in education and society means that prenatal exposure to alcohol can be a ‘poverty trap’” said Diane Black, co-founder and chairperson of the European FASD Alliance (EUFASD) “And there is no cure for FASD. That is why it is so important for societies to support women who are pregnant or trying to conceive to tackle drinking problems and reduce risks of prenatal alcohol exposure”.

The European Region has the highest rates of fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) in the world – with an overall prevalence of 19.8 cases of FASD per 1000 population, compared to the global average of 7.7 per 1000 population; and in Poland, the prevalence of FASD is even slightly above the European average, at 20 cases per 1000.<sup>6</sup> FASD is preventable by abstaining from drinking alcohol during pregnancy, as recommended by public health guidelines.

Dr Katarzyna Okulicz-Kozaryn (PARPA), leads the team developing and running the new programme. “Many women still don’t realise that there is *no safe limit* for drinking alcohol in pregnancy, and even health professionals often don’t feel confident in asking or advising pregnant women about this taboo subject”, says Okulicz-Kozaryn. “It’s hard for pregnant women to get practical help to reduce drinking, but we’re determined that this multi-level approach, with trained professionals and access through the website and health service, should make a real difference to these women’s lives – putting them back in control.”

As well as the new website, the regional pilot study involves training for a variety of health professionals who have contact with women in their daily work, giving them tools, skills and protocols on screening, brief intervention and referral to treatment, so that they can support women in tackling risky or harmful drinking, whether pregnant or not.



Image by [janeb13](#) from [Pixabay](#)

**FAR SEAS (Fetal Alcohol Reduction and exchange of European knowledge after SEAS – [www.far-seas.eu](http://www.far-seas.eu))** is a service contract awarded by the European Commission to a coordinated group of institutions lead by the CLÍNIC Foundation for Biomedical Research (FCRB, Barcelona).

The primary task of FAR SEAS, carried out by the Polish State Agency for the Prevention of Alcohol-Related Problems (PARPA) and Public Health Agency of Catalonia in Spain (Gencat), is to develop, pilot and evaluate a regional, evidence-based, good practice, to support women of child-bearing age, particularly pregnant women, in reducing in their alcohol consumption, and subsequently their babies’ risk of developing Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD). In addition, FAR SEAS will organise a series of thematic workshops with European Member States, aimed at capacity-building, knowledge-sharing and best practice exchange in policy areas related to alcohol control.

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<sup>6</sup> Okulicz-Kozaryn K., Borkowska M., Brzózka K. (2017) FASD Prevalence among Schoolchildren in Poland. JARID, 2017; 30(1): 61–70