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Aug. 30, 2002

FETAL ALCOHOL SYNDROME AWARENESS DAY SEPT. 9: BEST ADVICE FOR PREVENTING FAS/FAE IS TO ABSTAIN FROM DRINKING

For women who are pregnant or trying to conceive, steering clear of alcohol can prevent a lifetime of heartache. Even a small amount of alcohol consumed during pregnancy can result in a child born with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) or Fetal Alcohol Effects (FAE), says Jackie Jordan, clinical coordinator of substance abuse services at the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services.

Sept. 9 – the ninth day of the ninth month – is the fourth annual International Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Awareness Day. The observance is meant to educate the public about FAS and FAE, both of which result in lifelong learning complications for its tiny victims.

FAS is characterized by certain distorted facial features, low birth weight and damage to the central nervous system that results in mental retardation, learning disabilities and serious behavioral problems. Although not as obvious physically as FAS, FAE manifests itself in attention deficit disorder, learning disorders and serious behavioral difficulties.

“The scary thing about these conditions is that it doesn’t matter how much alcohol

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a pregnant women consumes,” Jordan said. “At one time, it was thought FAS and FAE were associated with heavy drinking. Data now suggests that even a small amount of alcohol can damage a fetus. Today, physicians and most substance abuse treatment providers push for zero tolerance.

“Essentially, if a woman even thinks she’s pregnant, the best advice is to not drink – period. Both FAS and FAE are totally preventable. People today seem to understand the risks associated with taking illegal drugs while pregnant, but alcohol actually does more damage. Part of this confusion may be from conflicting research that says, for instance, that wine is ‘good for your heart.’ People need to look at this information and realize that alcohol is extremely damaging to a developing fetus and can result in lifelong problems for the child.”

In Oklahoma alone, nearly 250 babies are born every year with FAS. Another 1,000 are born with FAE. Lifetime institutional and medical costs for one person with FAS are at least \$2 million, meaning that lifetime cost of care for the 1,250 babies born every year in Oklahoma with FAS or FAE can range upward of \$2 billion.

“Most people with FAS will never be able to live independently,” Jordan said. “Sixty percent of those 12 years and older have been kept out of school at some point and 60 percent have had trouble obeying the law.”

The Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services has made pregnant, substance-abusing women its highest priority in terms of special populations targeted for substance abuse treatment services, Jordan added.

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“In this situation, we’re dealing not only with a woman who is addicted to alcohol or drugs, but we’re also talking about the life of a child,” she said. “Pregnant women may enter our system through the Department of Human Services or through family members who recognize the danger the fetus is in. With our agency’s gender-specific treatment programs, we teach parenting skills, child abuse prevention and living skills. Women also may enter treatment with their children. All of our women-specific programs emphasize strong family bonds, parental involvement, and the promotion of healthy fun and healthy emotions in children.”

Jordan reiterated the importance of not drinking during pregnancy.

“It’s a risk a pregnant woman cannot afford to take,” she said. “Any time a pregnant woman chooses to take a drink, she is gambling with the life of her child.”

For more information about substance abuse programs in Oklahoma, call the agency’s “Reachout” hotline at 1-800-522-9054.

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