

Battling fetal alcohol spectrum disorder

Local fetal alcohol spectrum network educates public about the disorder and how to help prevent it

MATTHEW ALLEN
T&C STAFF

This Christmas, the Northwest Central Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) Network is working hard to raise awareness about the disorder.

"It's a problem everywhere: women are being served alcohol and women are getting pregnant," said network director Angela Kemble. "It doesn't just affect one group. Everyone needs to be careful."

Kemble is currently on a media blitz she hopes will educate the public about the impact of FASD on society, address myths about the disorder, and encourage safe habits by individuals and families over the holidays.

FASD occurs when a mother consumes alcohol while pregnant; the alcohol

is absorbed by the child in the womb and affects its development.

The child can suffer from learning disabilities, poor memory, have difficulty in social situations and struggle to grasp abstract concepts as a result.

One of the primary myths Kemble wants to combat is that a little alcohol is OK for the baby.

"A lot of people think that beer is OK, or a little bit of Irish cream in your coffee," she said. "No. Alcohol is alcohol."

Another issue Kemble wants to address is how people approach alcohol if they are having unprotected sex.

She says she has not met a mother who intentionally drank alcohol while pregnant to harm her baby. But as the holiday season ap-

proaches, Kemble knows that many unsuspecting parents could put an unborn child at risk as they enjoy the season's festivities.

"Over 50 per cent of pregnancies aren't planned, so you just continue on with life as usual until you're like, 'Hold on a minute something's off here,'" she said.

"But you've already done two to three months of partying."

Kemble said people need to change how they think about drinking and sex. If a couple is having unprotected sex, they should not drink.

"It's a mind shift right?" she said. "It's not 'wait until you're already pregnant.' It's planning for sex and not just letting it happen."

She says while people are receptive to the message, it can be difficult to change



habits that are ingrained.

"It's a tough mindset to change," she said.

In addition to changing people's habits, the network has been addressing myths about the disorder. Kemble says many people still think FASD automatically results in unique facial features. In reality, the effects of FASD vary depending on how far a baby's brain has developed when drinking takes place.

"You can't tell just by looking at someone if they have FASD," she said.

Finally, Kemble wants people to know that there is support available for those who have FASD. There are 12 FASD networks through-

out Alberta with home workers who mentor youth and adults with the disorder.

Darcy Dufoe, a home worker for Healthy Families Healthy Futures, works with 11 young adults in Athabasca who either have FASD or have presented symptoms of symptoms of the disorder.

She says educating the public about the disorder is a crucial step to preventing future cases and improving the lives of those who currently have it.

"You can't see it, so people don't understand," she said. "The more we can educate and get the knowledge out there, the better off everyone will be."

*From All of Us at
K&M Sales & Service*