5. Maternal alcohol use disorders

Eight per cent of Australian children less than 12 years of age live with mothers who drink alcohol at harmful levels. Mothers with an alcohol-use disorder place their children at risk of harm through prenatal alcohol exposure, psychological and environmental risk factors. Prenatal alcohol exposure can result in a range of poor fetal/child outcomes classified under the umbrella term Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD), including birth defects, language delay, cognitive delay and child behaviour/psychosocial problems such as social and emotional delay, somatic, internalizing, externalizing and mental health problems. Across the life course, exposure to environmental risk factors associated with heavy maternal alcohol use can indirectly increase the risk of harm to the child resulting in developmental problems. There are limited Australian estimates of FASD and of the prevalence of other alcohol-related harm(s) from the psychological or environmental risk factors associated with maternal alcohol-use disorders in Australian children. This research is examining the health and social outcomes of a large, population-based cohort of Western Australian children whose mother has an alcohol-use disorder. The mothers and their children were identified through linkage of routinely collected health and social administrative datasets.

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