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Monday, July 26

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome

Just one night with two many drinks and a pregnant woman can impact a child's brain forever.

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome is far more common than once thought.

Now one family's struggle has turned into a crusade to help the masses.

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome is rarely discussed and often misunderstood.

At times misdiagnosed as attention deficit hyperactivity, these children are seldom pegged for their true ailment, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, a condition that doesn't just affect babies but actually gets bigger as a child grows.

Walt and Kathy Teichen adopted Kevin. They were overjoyed, a son they would love and protect no matter what. As a child, he was anxious, easily agitated. In school he was hyperactive and diagnosed with ADHD.

"After he got out of high school, nineteen, nineteen and a half, things started going wrong. Kathy, my wife, said something is more wrong here than attention deficit disorder."

Kevin had learning difficulties, poor decision making skills and no sense of social situations. Ultimately, he got entangled with the wrong crowd and ended up behind bars at the DuPage County Jail.

Walt never gave up on Kevin, always trying to understand why his son struggled so. Finally an answer -- fetal alcohol effect.

"We never even heard of the disability let alone what the problems were."

First identified in the 1970's, many babies were easily spotted as fetal alcohol infants.

"The baby is born very small. We call it inter uterine growth retardation."

Trained doctors can see facial characteristics of fetal alcohol.

Eyes that are narrow and a thin upper lip. There is also a large, smooth space between the nose and mouth. But those facial cues may fade over time. The brain abnormality remains and is present in most children whose mothers drank excessively at some time during pregnancy.

"It's not just the hard liquor, even the beer is enough to cause fetal alcohol syndrome."

When a mother binge drinks even once with a child in utero, the alcohol kills neurons throughout the growing baby's brain during periods of critical development. The result is permanent brain damage.

"Their mental capacity to understand even if you train them is very low."

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Here's why -- look at the MRI brain scan on the left. Normal and full. Now see the brain on the right. An abnormality in the corpus collosum which connects the two halves of the brain cortex. Not all fetal alcohol brains look alike, but they all look abnormal.

"We cannot give them the medication and make them better." There is no cure, but thanks to people like Walt Teichen, there's hope.

"We've started a Christian residential home for men with fetal alcohol that will provide the structure. It will provide training for vocational social behavioral skills so at least they stand some chance of being a productive member of society."

And that's critical since the numbers of adults living with the dysfunction is staggering. Of the 10,000 babies born each day in this country:

One is HIV positive

Three have muscular dystrophy

Four have spinal bifida

Ten have down syndrome AND

Twenty have Fetal Alcohol Syndrome

Currently no cure so prevention is crucial. But recognition can help parents get the right services for their children.

For more information:

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Nagamani Beligere/UIC Fetal Alcohol Specialist
800-842-1002

National Expert:

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