

Pressemitteilung

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Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders in children may be underestimated

Out of 206 fourth-grade students, 19 met criteria for fetal alcohol spectrum disorders. This was found in a pilot study conducted at the University of Gothenburg. The results indicate that birth defects caused by alcohol consumption during pregnancy may be as common in Sweden as in several other European countries.

The study ran at six schools in western Sweden and constituted an add-on to the regular health check-up for all fourth-grade students. The participants underwent a physical examination, review of medical records and psychological tests of memory, attention, and problem-solving ability. Parents and teachers described the children's behavior and school performance, and the mothers were interviewed about their dietary habits and alcohol consumption during pregnancy.

Larger study needed

Of the 206 participants examined, fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) were found in 19 children. Ten had alcohol-related neurobehavioral disorder, four had partial fetal alcohol syndrome, and five had the most severe variant, fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS). The overall prevalence of FASD in the study group was 5.5 percent, of which 2.4 percent concerned FAS.

"Conducting the study in school as an add-on to the regular health check-up proved feasible. Our study is small, so a large-scale national study is needed to obtain a fuller picture. If the results are replicated, it would indicate that Sweden is on a par with many other European countries", says Valdemar Landgren, researcher at Sahlgrenska Academy at the University of Gothenburg, who is affiliated with the university's Gillberg Neuropsychiatry Centre and is the study's first author.

Few diagnosed

There are no prior studies investigating the prevalence of FASD in Sweden. According to nationwide statistics from Sweden's National Board of Health and Welfare, only about 60 children receive such a diagnosis each year.

"Today, these conditions are rarely diagnosed in Swedish healthcare. One reason may be that physicians don't assess for conditions of which they are unaware or believe to be very rare. Empirical knowledge about the actual prevalence is of importance for medical education and diagnostics, and for society to be able to work preventively," says Valdemar Landgren.

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Portrait image of Valdemar Landgren
Photo: University of Gothenburg

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