

January 2018- National Birth Defects Prevention Month

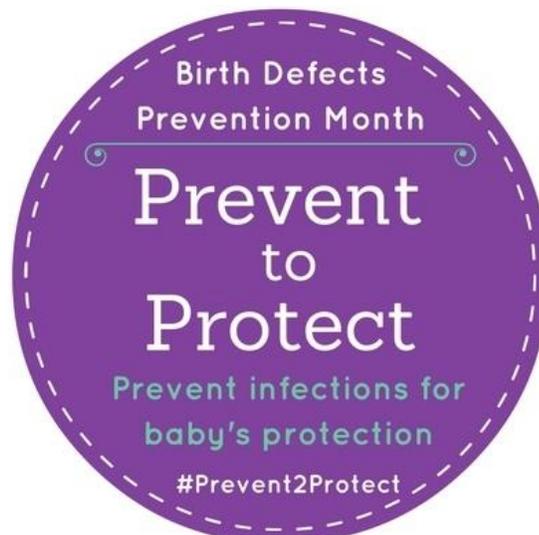
A note from the author—

Hello NCP friends! I hope everyone is making their New Year's resolutions and I wish you a safe and happy year. This month, we are featuring a "prevention" topic, as opposed to our usual "awareness" topic. I feel that a prevention topic is fitting because at the beginning of the year, many of us are very forward- focused and are hyper-aware that our actions now will affect the rest of our year. The theme that I chose for this month is based on an increasing focus on pregnancy within my various groups of family and friends. January is National Birth Defects Prevention Month and we are trying to bring attention to safe behaviors of pregnant mothers. If you, or someone you know, are [is] pregnant, I hope you enjoy the information below! Have a Happy New Year!



National Birth Defects Prevention Month 2018

January is Birth Defects Prevention Month. The theme for 2018 is "Prevent to Protect: Prevent Infections for Baby's Protection." We know that not all birth defects can be prevented. But, we also know that women can increase their chances of having a healthy baby by reducing their risk of getting an infection during pregnancy.



What are Birth Defects?

Birth defects are health conditions that are present at birth. They can cause serious problems in your baby's overall health, how his body develops and how his body works. Most people don't know how common, costly, and critical birth defects are in the United States, or that there are simple steps that can be taken to reduce the risk of birth defects. Birth Defects Prevention Month is a time to spread the word that there are things you can do to help prevent birth defects in your baby.



The Prevalence of Birth Defects

In the United States, about 1 in 33 babies (about 3 percent) is born with a birth defect each year. The term encompasses an assortment of health conditions, from clubfoot and cleft palate to Fragile X, spina bifida. Congenital heart defects, and phenylketonuria, among a host of others. All of these vary in their causes, severity, and treatments.

Every 4 ½ minutes, a baby is born with a birth defect in the United States. That means nearly 120,000 babies are affected by birth defects each year. Birth defects are structural changes present at birth that can affect almost any part or parts of the body (e.g., heart, brain, foot). They may affect how the body looks, works, or both. Birth defects can vary from mild to severe. The well-being of each child affected with a birth defect depends mostly on which organ or body part is involved and how much it is affected. Depending on the severity of the defect and what body part is affected, the expected lifespan of a person with a birth defect may or may not be affected.



Identifying Birth Defects

A birth defect can be found before birth, at birth, or any time after birth. Most birth defects are found within the first year of life. Some birth defects (such as cleft lip) are easy to see, but others (such as heart defects or hearing loss) are found using special tests, such as echocardiograms (an ultrasound picture of the heart), x-rays or hearing tests.



Causes of Birth Defects

Birth defects can occur during any stage of pregnancy. Most birth defects occur in the first 3 months of pregnancy, when the organs of the baby are forming. This is a very important stage of development. However, some birth defects occur later in pregnancy. During the last six months of pregnancy, the tissues and organs continue to grow and develop.

For some birth defects, like fetal alcohol syndrome, we know the cause. But for most birth defects, we don't know what causes them. For most birth defects, we think they are caused by a complex mix of factors. These factors include our genes (information inherited from our parents), our behaviors, and things in the environment. But, we don't fully understand how these factors might work together to cause birth defects.

While we still have more work to do, we have learned a lot about birth defects through past research. For example, some things might increase the chances of having a baby with a birth defect, such as:

- Smoking, drinking alcohol, or taking certain “street” drugs during pregnancy.
- Having certain medical conditions, such as being obese or having uncontrolled diabetes before and during pregnancy.
- Taking certain medications, such as isotretinoin (a drug used to treat severe acne).

- Having someone in your family with a birth defect. To learn more about your risk of having a baby with a birth defect, you can talk with a clinical geneticist or a genetic counselor.
- Being an older mother, typically over the age of 34 years.

Having one or more of these risks doesn't mean you'll have a pregnancy affected by a birth defect. Also, women can have a baby born with a birth defect even when they don't have any of these risks. It is important to talk to your doctor about what you can do to lower your risk.



Preventing Birth Defects

You can't always prevent birth defects in your baby. But if you're pregnant or thinking about having a baby, here's what you can do to help reduce the risk of birth defects and improve your chances of having a healthy baby:

- **Take folic acid before and during early pregnancy.** This can help prevent birth defects of the brain and spine called neural tube defects (also called NTDs) in your baby. Folic acid is a B vitamin that every cell in your body needs for normal growth and development. Before pregnancy, take a multivitamin that has 400 micrograms of folic acid in it every day. During pregnancy, take a prenatal vitamin that has 600 micrograms of folic acid in it every day. Take a multivitamin with folic acid every day, even if you're not trying to get pregnant.
- **Get a preconception checkup.** This is a medical checkup you get before pregnancy to help make sure you're healthy when you get pregnant. A preconception checkup is especially important if you've already had a baby with a birth defect. Your health care provider can make sure you're healthy, check that your vaccinations are up to date and make sure any medicines that you take are safe to keep taking during pregnancy. Being exposed to certain medicines or infections in the womb can sometimes cause birth defects in a baby. Be sure to see your healthcare provider regularly and start prenatal care as soon as you think you might be pregnant.

- **Know your medical history and risk factors during pregnancy.** If possible, be sure any medical conditions are under control, before becoming pregnant. Some conditions that increase the risk for birth defects include diabetes and obesity.
- **Consult your doctor about medications.** Talk to a healthcare provider about any medications you are taking or thinking about taking. This includes prescription and over-the-counter medications and dietary or herbal supplements. Don't stop or start taking any type of medication without first talking with a doctor.
- **Don't drink alcohol during pregnancy.** Drinking alcohol during pregnancy makes your baby more likely to have premature birth (before 37 weeks of pregnancy), birth defects and a group of conditions called fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (also called FASDs). Alcohol can cause problems for your baby at any time in pregnancy, even before you know you're pregnant.



- **Protect yourself from common infections.** Wash your hands often, especially after using the bathroom, sneezing or coughing, changing a diaper or preparing food. Don't eat raw or undercooked food, including lunch meats. Cook meat, chicken and fish until done. Wash food before you cook or eat it. Don't touch cat poop or change a cat's litter box to protect you from toxoplasmosis. It is important to wash your hands for 20 seconds after contact with bodily fluids to reduce the risk of getting sick.
- **Don't travel to a Zika-affected area, unless it's absolutely necessary.** Zika virus infection during pregnancy can cause a birth defect called microcephaly and other problems. If you do travel to Zika-affected areas, protect yourself from mosquito bites. If your male or female sex partner may be infected with Zika, don't have sex. If you do have sex, use a condom. If you work in a health care setting, follow safety rules to protect yourself from exposure to Zika.
- **Make sure your vaccinations are up to date.** Vaccinations help protect the mother and child against serious diseases.

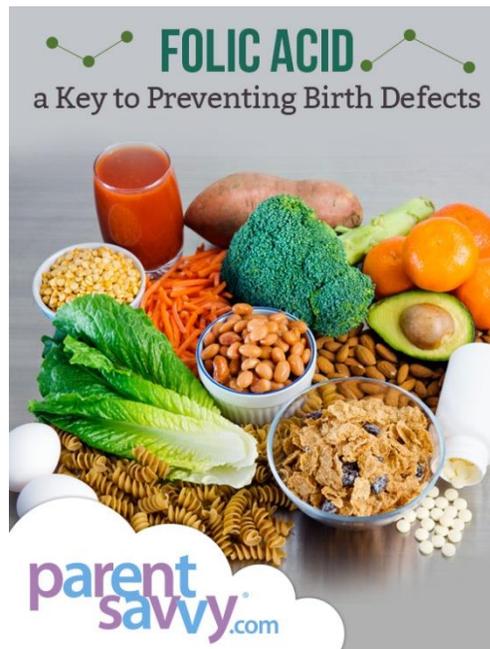
- **Prevent infections in your newborn.** Health care providers should encourage their patients to avoid putting a young child's cup or pacifier in their mouth to reduce the risk of CMV infection.

The CDC's "Commit to Health Choices" Plan for Pregnant Women
(from <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/birthdefects/prevention.html>)

We know that not all birth defects can be prevented. But, we also know that women can increase their chances of having a healthy baby by managing health conditions and adopting healthy behaviors before becoming pregnant. Make a PACT, a commitment to yourself, to get healthy before and during pregnancy by actively trying to plan ahead, avoid harmful substances, choose a healthy lifestyle, and talk with your healthcare provider.

1. Plan ahead.

- **Get 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid every day.**
Folic acid is a B vitamin. If a woman has enough folic acid in her body at least one month before and during pregnancy, it can help prevent major birth defects of the developing brain and spine (anencephaly and spina bifida). Women can get folic acid from fortified foods or supplements, or a combination of the two, in addition to a varied diet rich in folate.



- **See a healthcare professional regularly.**
A woman should be sure to see her doctor when planning a pregnancy and start prenatal care as soon as she thinks that she is pregnant. It is important to see the doctor regularly throughout pregnancy, so a woman should keep all her prenatal care appointments. If you are trying to have a baby or are just thinking about it, it is not too early to start getting ready for pregnancy. Use these

checklists to help you write down your goals, whether you are planning a pregnancy or trying to get and stay healthy overall.

2. **Avoid harmful substances.**

- **Avoid alcohol at any time during pregnancy.** Alcohol in a woman's bloodstream passes to the developing baby through the umbilical cord. There is no known safe amount of alcohol use during pregnancy or while trying to get pregnant. There is also no safe time during pregnancy to drink. All types of alcohol are equally harmful, including wine and beer. Drinking alcohol during pregnancy can cause miscarriage, stillbirth, and a range of lifelong physical, behavioral, and intellectual disabilities. These disabilities in the child, which occur because the mother drank alcohol during the pregnancy, are known as fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASDs). The best advice for women is to stop drinking alcohol when trying to get pregnant.



- **Avoid smoking cigarettes.** The dangers of smoking during pregnancy include preterm birth, certain birth defects (cleft lip or cleft palate), and infant death. Even being around tobacco smoke puts a woman and her pregnancy at risk for problems. Quitting smoking **before** getting pregnant is best. For a woman who is already pregnant, quitting as early as possible can still help protect against some health problems for the baby, such as low birth weight. It's never too late to quit smoking.
- **Avoid marijuana and other drugs.** A woman who uses marijuana or other drugs during pregnancy can have a baby who is born preterm, of low birth weight, or has other health problems, such as birth defects. Marijuana is the illicit drug most commonly used during pregnancy. Since we know of no safe level of marijuana use during pregnancy, women who are pregnant, or considering becoming pregnant, should not use marijuana, even in states where marijuana is legal. Women using marijuana for medical reasons should speak with their doctor about an alternative therapy with pregnancy-specific safety data.
- **Prevent infections.** Some infections that a woman can get during pregnancy can be harmful to the developing baby and can even cause birth defects.



3. Choose a healthy lifestyle.

- **Keep diabetes under control.**

Poor control of diabetes during pregnancy increases the chances for birth defects and other problems for the pregnancy. It can also cause serious complications for the woman. Proper healthcare before and during pregnancy can help prevent birth defects and other poor outcomes.

- **Strive to reach and maintain a healthy weight.** A woman who is obese (a body mass index [BMI] of 30 or higher) before pregnancy is at a higher risk for complications during pregnancy. Obesity also increases a pregnant woman's risk of several serious birth defects. Even if a woman is not actively planning a pregnancy, getting healthy can help boost her health and her mood. If a woman is overweight or obese, she should talk with her doctor about ways to reach a healthy weight **before** she gets pregnant.

4. Talk with your healthcare provider.

- **Talk to a healthcare provider about taking any medications.** We know that certain medications can cause serious birth defects if they are taken during pregnancy. For many medications taken by pregnant women, the safety has been difficult to determine. Despite the limited safety data, some medications are needed to treat serious conditions. If a woman is pregnant or planning a pregnancy, she should not stop taking medications she needs or begin taking new medications without first talking with her healthcare provider. This includes prescription and over-the-counter medications and dietary or herbal products.
- **Talk to a healthcare provider about vaccinations (shots).** Most vaccinations are safe during pregnancy and some vaccinations, such as the flu vaccine and the Tdap vaccine (adult tetanus, diphtheria and acellular pertussis vaccine), are specifically recommended during pregnancy. Some vaccines protect women against infections that can cause birth defects. Having the right vaccinations at the right time can help keep a woman and her baby healthy. She should talk to her doctor about which vaccines are recommended

for her during pregnancy.

Pregnant women are more prone to severe illness from the flu, including hospitalizations and even death, when compared to women who are not pregnant. Pregnant women with flu also have an increased risk of serious problems for their pregnancy, including preterm birth. Getting a flu shot is the first and most important step in protecting against flu. The flu shot given during pregnancy has been shown to protect both the mother and her baby (for up to 6 months after delivery) from the flu.



Living with a Birth Defect

Babies who have birth defects often need special care and interventions to survive and to thrive developmentally. State birth defects tracking programs provide one way to identify and refer children as early as possible for services they need. Early intervention is vital to improving outcomes for these babies. If your child has a birth defect, you should ask his or her doctor about local resources and treatment. Geneticists, genetic counselors, and other specialists are another resource.

**For more information about specific birth defects, visit the CDC's page at:
<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/birthdefects/types.html>



Resources

<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/birthdefects/prevention-month.html>

https://www.nbdpn.org/national_birth_defects_prevent.php

<https://www.nbdpn.org/bdpm.php>

<http://www.kswo.com/story/37154831/january-is-national-birth-defects-prevention-month>

https://www.nichd.nih.gov/about/overview/directors_corner/prev_updates/010715-birth-defects

<https://www.marchofdimes.org/january-is-birth-defects-prevention-month.aspx>