

HEALTH IN OUR HANDS!

The Arkansas State University Wellness Program Newsletter
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Birth Defect Prevention

Introduction

January is recognized as Birth Defect Prevention month. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) raises awareness among women and families in hopes of limiting the risk of a birth defect. In addition, they recognize those living with a birth defect and provide information on care and social support to improve quality of life.

Facts

- Birth defects may involve different organs including the brain, heart, lungs, liver, bones, and intestinal tract.
- Common examples of birth defects include heart defects, cleft lip or palate, down syndrome, spina bifida, and limb defects.
- Birth defects are now the leading cause of infant mortality in the United States; defects are present in 1/5 of babies that die.

- Every 4 1/2 minutes, a baby is born with a birth defect in the United States—that makes for about 120,000 birth defects each year.
- Birth defects affect 1 in every 33 babies.

Causes

- Birth defects can occur during any stage of pregnancy; however, most occur in the first 3 months when the organs are forming.
- The cause of some birth defects (such as fetal alcohol syndrome) is clear. Unfortunately, the cause of most birth defects is unknown, but research has allowed us to better understand what might increase the risk of having a baby with a defect.
- Research suggests that during pregnancy, the following can increase the risk for a birth defect:

- Smoking, drinking alcohol, or taking “street” drugs.
- Obesity or uncontrolled diabetes.
- Taking certain medications, such as isotretinoin (used for severe acne).
- History of birth defects in the family.
- Mothers age over 34 years.
- A birth defect can still occur in women without the above risk factors.

Prevention

- Get 400 micrograms of folic acid every day.
 - This is a B vitamin that helps prevent major birth defects of the developing brain and spine.
 - Folic acid can be obtained from food or supplements, or a combination of the two.

- Visit a healthcare professional regularly.
- Avoid alcohol at any time during pregnancy.
 - Alcohol in the bloodstream passes to the baby through the umbilical cord.
 - Can cause miscarriage, stillbirth, and a range of lifelong physical, behavioral, and intellectual disabilities.
- Avoid smoking cigarettes.
 - Dangers include preterm birth, certain defects (cleft lip or palate), and infant death.
 - Smoking cessation before pregnancy is best.
 - Second hand smoke also puts the baby at risk.
- Avoid marijuana and other “street drugs”.
 - Results in a baby who is born preterm, low birth weight, or has other health problems/defects.
 - Women using marijuana for medical reasons should speak with their doctor about an alternative therapy.
- Prevent infections.
 - Wash hands frequently, cook meat until it is well done, and stay away from others with an infection.
- Properly manage diabetes.
 - Uncontrolled diabetes poses a threat to both the developing baby and mother.
- Strive to reach and maintain a healthy weight.
 - A women who is obese (BMI of 30 or more) is at a greater risk for complications.
- Talk with your healthcare provider about medications and vaccinations.
 - Pregnant women are prone to severe illness from flu; contact your doctor on how to have a safe pregnancy and get a flu shot.

Living with a Birth Defect

The following link provides free tools and information about birth defects for families. Children who have birth defects often need special care. Early intervention is critical to improve outcomes for babies with birth defects.

<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/birthdefects/families.html>

References

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Other News:

**If you have any suggestions for newsletter topics, please contact Dean Susan Hanrahan at hanrahan@astate.edu.

The Arkansas State University Employee Wellness Newsletter is published monthly during the academic year by the College of Nursing and Health Professions. Health questions can be addressed to Dean Susan Hanrahan, Ph.D., ext. 3112 or hanrahan@astate.edu. Produced by Karinda Polk, graduate student in the College of Nursing and Health Professions, Physical Therapy Program.