

## Reducing the Risk of Birth Defects

### What Everyone Should Know

Out of every 100 babies born in the U.S., two or three will have some kind of major birth defect<sup>1</sup>. Nobody intends to have a child with a birth defect. The causes of birth defects are largely unknown, although several risk factors have been identified. A woman can help to increase her chances of having a healthy baby. It is important that women of all ages know that setting healthy habits early can lead to a healthy pregnancy months and years later in life.

### A Woman's Checklist Starts Before Pregnancy

- Consume 400 mcg folic acid every day from a multivitamin OR one serving of fortified cereal
- Use birth control if you are not planning a family
- Eat a balanced diet and participate in physical activity ([www.mypyramid.gov](http://www.mypyramid.gov))
- Visit the dentist in order to maintain your oral health
- Identify and reduce emotional stresses
- Visit your doctor before you become pregnant to get **preconception care**:
  - Discuss stopping your current birth control
  - Discuss your health - especially high blood pressure, diabetes, epilepsy, or phenylketonuria (PKU)
  - Discuss your prescription medications
  - Discuss your over-the-counter medications
  - Discuss herbs and supplements you may take
  - Discuss your family history
  - Discuss risks due to your age
  - Discuss taking 4 mg (=4000 mcg) of folic acid if you previously had a baby with a neural tube defect
  - Get up-to-date on your immunizations (tell your doctor if you may already be pregnant)
  - Test and get treatment for any suspected vaginal or urinary infections
- When you are trying to become or are pregnant:
  - Avoid cat litter boxes and cat feces
  - Cook all meat thoroughly & select safe foods ([www.cfsan.fda.gov/~pregnant/pregnant.html](http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~pregnant/pregnant.html))
  - Avoid smoking, alcohol and substance abuse
  - Talk to your employer about minimizing hazardous exposures at work (pesticides, lead, mercury, radiation)
  - Read the labels on all products you use, and avoid those that are "toxic" also avoid "organic solvents"

### What Every Woman and Girl Should Know

In the U.S., approximately half of pregnancies are unplanned<sup>2</sup>. Birth defects can happen very early in pregnancy, before you know that you are pregnant. You should know how to reduce your risks, in fact there are some simple steps that can be incorporated into your daily routine right now, such as consuming 400 mcg of folic acid daily.

- Even if you are not planning to start a family, you should know the healthy steps in this Woman's Checklist.
- If you think you are pregnant, use the checklist as a guide.
- When you are ready to start thinking about having a baby, you should carefully review this checklist.

### But My Friend's Baby was Fine...

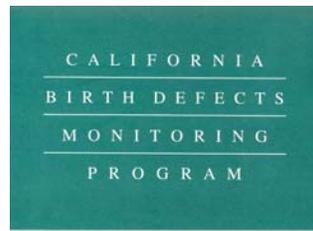
Birth defects happen when a number of conditions occur together. All of the following may contribute to the risk of birth defects: mother's nutritional, physical and mental health before and during pregnancy; mother's, father's and baby's genes; environmental exposures; and timing. Your pregnancy outcome may be different from your friend's. For example, some genes make a fetus (unborn baby) more susceptible to a mother's smoking<sup>3,4</sup>. Timing of mother's nutrition (folic acid intake) is important for development of the fetus<sup>5</sup>. Consider reducing your risks in as many ways as you can. However, birth defects can happen to anyone, and a woman can follow every recommendation and still have a baby born with a birth defect.

### Prenatal Care and Screening

Prenatal care and prenatal screening are important for your health and the health of your baby. Scientific evidence has shown that visiting your doctor early in your pregnancy can help improve pregnancy outcomes. A screening test estimates the chance that the fetus has certain birth defects. For more information, please visit the [California Prenatal Screening Program](http://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/Pages/Immunization/PrenatalScreening.aspx) website.

### Preparing for a Special Needs Baby

Knowing the health of your unborn baby will help you to make important decisions during your pregnancy and to prepare for your baby's arrival. CBDMP offers several fact sheets on specific birth defects ([www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/Pages/Immunization/PrenatalScreening.aspx](http://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/Pages/Immunization/PrenatalScreening.aspx)). Parents may consider delivering at a tertiary care facility, which may be better equipped to treat an infant with birth defects. Some parents find organizational or online support networks beneficial. There may be post-birth care and financial considerations. California offers many resources (see contact information on next page). Your current circumstances may make programs available, for which you may not have qualified in the past.



## Reducing the Risk of Birth Defects

### Resources For Families

#### **California Birth Defects Monitoring Program (CBDMP)**

*CBDMP collects and analyzes data to identify opportunities for preventing birth defects and improving the health of babies.*

- Email: [info@cdbmp.org](mailto:info@cdbmp.org)
- Website: [www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/cbdmp](http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/cbdmp)

#### **California Preconception Health & Health Care Program**

*This program's goal is to improve the health and well-being of women prior to pregnancy and work toward eliminating disparities in maternal and infant morbidity and mortality.*

- Email: [mchinet@cdph.ca.gov](mailto:mchinet@cdph.ca.gov)
- Website: [www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/preconception/](http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/preconception/)

#### **California Children's Services (CCS)**

*California Children's Services is a state program for children with certain diseases or health problems.*

- Website: [www.dhs.ca.gov/ccs](http://www.dhs.ca.gov/ccs)

#### **Family Resource Centers Networks of California**

*This program's mission is to support families of children with disabilities, special healthcare needs, and those at risk by ensuring the continuance, expansion, promotion and quality of family-centered, parent-directed, family resource centers.*

- Website: <http://www.frcnca.org/>

#### **Birth Defects Research for Children, Inc.**

*Birth Defect Research for Children is a resource for free birth defect information, parent networking and birth defect research through the National Birth Defect Registry.*

- Phone: 1-407-566-8304
- Website: <http://www.birthdefects.org/>

#### **March of Dimes**

*The March of Dimes is dedicated to improving the health of babies by preventing birth defects, premature birth and infant mortality.*

- Phone: 1-888-663-4637
- Website: [www.marchofdimes.org](http://www.marchofdimes.org)

#### **California Prenatal Screening Program**

*California Prenatal Screening Program is working to reduce the occurrence of birth defects and disability by offering prenatal screening and follow-up services to pregnant women in California.*

- Website: [www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/pns/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/pns/Pages/default.aspx)

#### **California Healthy Families Program**

*Healthy Families is low cost insurance for children and teens.*

- Phone: 1-800-880-5305
- Email: [HealthyFamilies@MAXIMUS.com](mailto:HealthyFamilies@MAXIMUS.com)
- Website: [www.healthyfamilies.ca.gov](http://www.healthyfamilies.ca.gov)

#### **Regional Centers in California**

*Regional Centers are nonprofit private corporations that contract with the Department of Developmental Services to provide or coordinate services and supports for individuals with developmental disabilities.*

- Phone: 1-916-654-1690
- Website: [www.dds.ca.gov/RC/Home.cfm](http://www.dds.ca.gov/RC/Home.cfm)

#### **National Center for Birth Defects and Dev. Disabilities**

*The National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities (NCBDDD) promotes the health of babies, children, and adults, and enhances the potential for full, productive living.*

- Phone: 1-770-488-7160
- Website: [www.cdc.gov/ncbddd](http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd)

### References

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