

# Health Care Provider Sample Letter

Dear Health Care Professional:

As you may know, birth defects are a leading cause of infant mortality. These conditions also place a considerable emotional and economic burden on individuals, families, communities, and health care providers. In (*Your State*), approximately (###) babies are born with a birth defect each year. Nationwide, around 120,000 babies are affected annually. In an effort to raise public awareness and educate women about strategies that reduce the risk for birth defects, we hope you will join us in promotion of National Birth Defects Prevention Month in January. This year's focus is congenital heart defects with the tagline: "*And the Beat Goes on... Looking to the Future for Healthy Hearts.*"

Congenital heart defects affect nearly 1% of newborns in the United States and are a leading cause of infant mortality (1-3). The majority of congenital heart defects are not directly associated with other conditions, however about 15% of congenital heart defects are related to various genetic and chromosomal syndromes such as Down syndrome, trisomy 13, Turner syndrome, Marfan syndrome, Noonan syndrome, and DiGeorge syndrome (4,5). Around 20-30% of people with congenital heart defects have other physical problems or developmental or cognitive disorders (6-8).

No known cause can be identified for most congenital heart defects although research continues to identify the causes of these defects. Drugs such as retinoic acid for acne, chemicals, alcohol, and infections such as rubella during pregnancy can contribute to some congenital heart problems.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Birth Defects Prevention Study (NBDPS), the largest study in the US looking at the causes of birth defects, has reported an increased risk for congenital heart defects associated with maternal obesity (9), diabetes (10), and smoking (11). Researchers have also found that congenital heart defects contribute to racial disparities in infant mortality rates in the United States. Congenital heart defects were found to be the underlying cause of death in 4.2% of the 54,008 deaths occurring during the first month of life among infants of white or black mothers. Among preterm births (less than 37 weeks gestation) mortality due to congenital heart defects was shown to be lower among infants of black mothers (4.5 per 10,000 live births) than whites (6.8 per 10,000 live births). Conversely, among term births, rates of mortality due to congenital heart defects were higher for blacks (1.5 per 10,000 live births) than for whites (1.3 per 10,000 live births) (12).

Although the majority of congenital heart defects cannot be prevented, women who are pregnant or could become pregnant can lower their risk of having a baby with a congenital heart defect by following some basic health guidelines, including:

- Take 400mcg of folic acid daily
- Eat a healthy diet
- Get a medical checkup before pregnancy
- Stop smoking and avoid second hand smoke
- Stop drinking alcohol
- Do not take illegal drugs

Research has also found that women who have had a congenital heart defect are now, due to advances in diagnosis and treatment of congenital heart disease, reaching adulthood. Because of this, women who plan on becoming pregnant should be referred to a center that specializes in adult congenital heart disease, where care can be offered to provide specific guidance for maternal and fetal risks of pregnancy.

You can make a difference in the lives of (*your State*) families. The National Birth Defects Prevention Network encourages you to review this information and reach out to your patients. If you have questions or would like more information, please contact \_\_\_\_\_ (*public health/ surveillance program/MCH program/Birth Defects/Genetics Programs*) or visit the National Birth Defects Prevention Network at [www.nbdpn.org](http://www.nbdpn.org).

Sincerely,

## **References**

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