

Maternal Steps to Help Prevent Heart Defects

Congenital heart defects are the most common types of birth defects. About 1 in 110 babies are born with a heart defect. We do not always understand what causes a heart defect, but, there are some factors that are thought to increase their risk. These are things that every woman who is pregnant or may become pregnant can do to help prevent heart defects and have a healthy pregnancy.

- **Take a multivitamin with folic acid every day.** Folic acid, a type of B vitamin, can help prevent birth defects such as spina bifida and congenital heart defects. It is important to have enough folic acid in your body even *before* you get pregnant. Every woman who is pregnant or may become pregnant should take at least 400 micrograms of folic acid every day.
- **If you have diabetes, keep your blood sugar in good control.** Women with poorly controlled diabetes before and during pregnancy are at increased risk to have a baby with birth defects, including heart defects. Very high blood sugar levels can also increase the chance of pregnancy complications, of having an extra large baby, and of having a baby that is at increased risk for childhood obesity and diabetes. You can keep your blood sugar in a healthy range by eating a healthy diet, exercising regularly, and taking medications (pills or insulin) as ordered by your doctor.

To receive text message reminders about taking folic acid and other health tips for preventing birth defects from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), text REMINDERS to 87000.

- **Don't drink alcohol or smoke tobacco during pregnancy.** Drinking alcohol and smoking tobacco in pregnancy may increase the risk of having a baby with a heart defect. In addition, alcohol use in pregnancy can cause a child to have serious learning and behavior problems. There is no known safe amount of alcohol during pregnancy, so it is best not to smoke or drink at all if you are pregnant or planning to become pregnant.
- **Maintain a healthy weight, both before and during pregnancy.** Being very overweight (obese) may increase the chance of having a baby with a congenital heart defect. Obesity can also lead to the development of diabetes, which can have health risks for you and a baby.
- **Get vaccinated.** Some infections during pregnancy, such as rubella, can increase the risk of congenital heart defects and other birth defects. Before you become pregnant, talk to your doctor about whether your vaccinations are up to date. Influenza (the flu) is more likely to cause severe illness in pregnant women than in women who are not pregnant. It is recommended that all women who are pregnant or may become pregnant during the flu season get the flu shot.
- **Know your family history.** Certain genetic factors can increase the chance of having a baby with a heart defect. If someone in your family was born with a heart defect, or if you have questions about genetic testing for heart defects, ask your doctor for a referral to a genetic counselor.

Need help quitting smoking? Visit www.smokefree.gov or call toll-free 1-800-QUIT-NOW.

For free information about the safety of medications and other exposures during pregnancy and breastfeeding, call OTIS at 1-866-626-6847.

To find a genetic counselor near you, go to the National Society of Genetic Counselors' website (www.nsgc.org) and click on [Find a Genetic Counselor](#).