



## SAMPLE LETTER TO HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS

Dear Health Care Professional:

As you likely know, birth defects are a leading cause of infant and childhood mortality. These conditions also place a considerable physical, emotional and economic burden on individuals, families, and society-at-large. In (*Your State*), approximately (####) babies are born with a birth defect each year. Nationwide, 1 in 33 newborns are affected annually. In an effort to raise public awareness of the prevalence of birth defects and raise both lay and professional awareness of strategies that reduce the risk for birth defects and their complications, we hope you will join us in promotion of National Birth Defects Prevention Month - January 2013. This year's focus is on raising general awareness of the fact that– *“Every 4 ½ minutes a baby is born with a birth defect”*.

Birth defects affect 3 to 4% of newborns in the United States [1]. In the United States, birth defects account for 20% of infant deaths, as well as 6% to 15% of deaths in children up to age 14 years [2]. The most common type of birth defects, congenital heart defects, have a birth prevalence of about 1 in 100 births, and are a leading cause of infant mortality [3-5]. Congenital cardiac and circulatory anomalies account for about one in three birth-defect related hospital stays and account for \$1.4 billion of the \$2.6 billion in annual hospital expenses attributed to birth defects [6]. Around 20-30% of people with congenital heart defects have other physical problems or developmental or cognitive disorders [7-9].

The medical costs (in-hospital, outpatient, and prescription drug expenses) for a child with an orofacial cleft are 500% to 800% higher than those for a non-affected child [10]. The estimated overall lifetime expenses related to Down syndrome range from \$180,000 to \$880,000 (in 2013-adjusted-dollars) [11]. None of these numbers consider the loss of income and productivity, or the day-to-day emotional and physical stresses that affect both the patient and the primary caregivers.

It is estimated that we know the cause of only about 30% of birth defects [12]. While no known etiology has been identified for most birth defects, research continues to further our understanding of their causes. However, many preventive measures have been identified and raising awareness and universal utilization of these measures, both among the public and the healthcare community, can help to significantly limit the occurrence of birth defects. Maternal obesity, diabetes, lack of adequate folic acid/folate intake, smoking, alcohol consumption, infections, and many legal and illegal drugs have been clearly identified as major factors in determining the risk of birth defect occurrence [13-19].

Although not all birth defects can be prevented, the healthcare community can help all women (including teens) who are pregnant or could become pregnant to lower their risk of having a baby with a birth defect by encouraging them to follow some basic health guidelines throughout their reproductive years, including:

- Take 400mcg of folic acid *daily* from the beginning of menstruation through menopause.
- Eat a healthy diet and aim for a healthy weight.
- Keep diabetes under control.
- Get a medical checkup before pregnancy and address specific health issues including weight control, control of diabetes, and any medications taken.

- Stop smoking and avoid second-hand smoke.
- Stop drinking alcohol prior to pregnancy or as soon in pregnancy as possible.
- Do not take illegal drugs.
- Plan carefully. Use contraception if taking medications that increase the risk for birth defects.

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,

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