

Ways to reduce the risk of birth defects in the fetus

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Birth defects are conditions that are present from birth and can adversely affect an individual's health by changing the shape or function of the body. Birth defects can affect overall health, how the body develops, or how the body functions. These can include heart defects, cleft lip or palate, brain or spinal cord defects, nervous system disorders, learning, vision or hearing problems, and metabolic disorders.

Some defects are mild and can be treated before or after birth with minimal long-term effects. Others are life-changing, causing mental or physical problems that require long-term treatment and support, while others are life-threatening.

For babies from birth to 12 months and children from 1 to 4 years old, birth defects are the first and second most common causes of death. *' Many people don't realize how common or serious they are, or how much they can affect quality of life ,'* says Connie Motter, a certified genetic counselor at Akron Children's. *' In the United States, a baby is born with a birth defect every 4.5 minutes. That's nearly 1 in 33 live births. Many people think that if a birth defect isn't in their family history, it won't happen to them .'* That's a misconception.

A woman's health is important every day, whether she plans to have children or not. Taking care of her health through good nutrition, regular exercise and stress management helps her feel her best and lays a solid foundation for the future. Since more than half of pregnancies are unplanned, taking a proactive approach to her health now will ensure that if she does become pregnant, she gives her baby the best possible start. The first few

weeks of pregnancy are crucial to the baby's development, so a woman's health during these early stages is vital. By focusing on small, simple steps to take care of her health today, women can be confident that they are doing something great for their future.

But it's not just the expectant mother, as partners also play a key role. The father's health and lifestyle – such as avoiding smoking, eating a balanced diet and staying active – can directly impact the health of the baby. Healthy habits can improve sperm quality, **reduce the risk of birth defects** and create a supportive environment for a healthy pregnancy. When both parents prioritise their health, they set the stage for a brighter future, for themselves and their family. Together, small changes today can make a big difference tomorrow.

Research recommends the following five steps women can take to reduce their risk of birth defects before and during pregnancy.



Taking a multivitamin with 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid every day is a simple but essential habit for women of reproductive age.

Even if you're not actively planning to get pregnant, a multivitamin can help fill in the nutritional gaps that many women experience due to their diet. It's important that if you do get pregnant, your body has the nutrients it needs to support your baby's early brain and spinal cord development—critical processes that take place before most women even realize they're pregnant.

For women who are actively planning a pregnancy, switching to prenatal vitamins a few months before is recommended to ensure both mother and baby receive optimal nutrition.

Folic acid, found in a multivitamin, is especially important because it helps prevent serious birth defects, such as neural tube defects that affect a baby's brain and spine, as well as cleft lip and palate. Some women may prefer bioavailable forms of folate, such as L-methylfolate or folinic acid, which are alternatives to synthetic folic acid and may be better absorbed by people with certain metabolic conditions.

Schedule a check-up with your doctor before stopping or starting any medication.

Discussing a treatment plan before pregnancy allows women and their individual healthcare providers to weigh the pros and cons of all options to keep mother and baby as healthy as possible.

Fully vaccinated.

Getting the right vaccines at the right time before or during pregnancy can help keep women and their babies healthy.

Focus on achieving optimal pre-pregnancy weight goals.

Maintaining a healthy weight before pregnancy and maintaining the recommended weight throughout pregnancy can help reduce the risk of birth defects and pregnancy complications. Maintaining a healthy weight is important for fertility, as body weight plays an important role in hormonal balance, ovulation, and overall reproductive health. This is true for both underweight and overweight people.

Promote good health by avoiding harmful substances during pregnancy, such as alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.

1. **There is no known safe amount of alcohol** during pregnancy. Alcohol exposure can cause serious birth defects and brain damage, which can lead to cognitive delays, learning disabilities, poor memory, and difficulties with attention and impulse control. If a woman is struggling with alcohol use, it is important to seek support early to minimize the risks to her health and that of her baby.
2. **Smoking or vaping** during pregnancy can affect the placenta and baby, increasing the risk of low birth weight, placental abruption, premature birth, and certain birth defects, such as cleft lip and palate. Babies exposed to tobacco during pregnancy or after birth are also at higher risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).
3. **Opioid use during pregnancy** is associated with adverse health effects for both the pregnant woman and her baby, including increased risk of maternal death, poor fetal growth, premature birth, stillbirth, certain birth defects, and neonatal opioid withdrawal syndrome (also known as neonatal opioid withdrawal syndrome).



While not all birth defects are preventable, there are many things women can easily do to increase their chances of having a healthy baby. It is important to remember that even with the best planning, some birth defects can occur due to factors beyond anyone's control. The actions you take to care for your health today will not only give your baby the best possible start in life, but also reflect your commitment to creating a healthier future for all children, regardless of the challenges they may face.

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