

## MDH highlights importance of folic acid as part of National Birth Defects Prevention Month

Written by Minnesota Department of Health  
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The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) is joining the National Birth Defects Prevention Network (NBDPN) and the Minnesota March of Dimes to inform women about ways to prevent birth defects in Minnesota throughout January, which is National Birth Defects Prevention Month. Birth defects affect more than 2,000 babies born in Minnesota each year. Gov. Mark Dayton has also proclaimed January as Birth Defects Prevention Month.

Birth Defects are the leading cause of infant deaths and the second leading cause of death in children aged one to four years in the United States. Every four and a half minutes, a baby is born with a birth defect. This means that birth defects affect 1 in every 33 babies born in the United States.

"Fortunately, many types of birth defects can be reduced through healthy lifestyle choices and medical interventions before and during pregnancy," said Minnesota Commissioner of Health Dr. Ed Ehlinger. "We want to make all women in their reproductive years aware of the importance of being healthy before getting pregnant, the significance of the first few weeks of pregnancy, and the value of taking folic acid on a regular basis."

All women of reproductive age should be taking a multivitamin containing folic acid every day because folic acid has been shown to prevent serious birth defects of the brain and spine.

Martha Overby, director of programs and government affairs for the March of Dimes in Minnesota, notes that about half of pregnancies in Minnesota are unplanned. "Taking folic acid is such an easy thing to do that can have such a major benefit to your future family and give your baby the healthiest start in life."

To help prevent birth defects, studies have shown that women should:

Avoid all alcohol and illegal/recreational drugs if there is a chance they may become pregnant.

Stop smoking and avoid all exposure to smoke, chemicals and toxins, both at work and at home.

See a physician before pregnancy. This is especially important for women who are taking medications for medical conditions such as seizures or depression; have any known metabolic conditions, including diabetes or obesity; or have a family history of birth defects.

Ensure their blood sugar is under control and achieve a healthy weight before pregnancy if they have diabetes or are obese.

Take 400 mcg of folic acid daily throughout the child-bearing years and check with health care providers about getting adequate amounts of all essential nutrients. Learn about their family history and potential genetic risks.

MDH is working with local public health departments across the state during January to help raise awareness about preventing birth defects.

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"MDH is excited to be part of this national event and is distributing information to local public health departments and health professionals who work with women across the state," said Kristin Oehlke, birth defects program manager at MDH. "Through our efforts, we aim to reach women and their families with vital prevention information about how diet, lifestyle choices, environmental factors, health conditions and medications all can play a role in preventing or causing birth defects." In addition she added that women can take other steps in their everyday lives, such as seeing a health care professional regularly, to support healthy pregnancies and reduce the risk for birth defects.

More information is available at <http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/eh/birthdefects/index.html> .□