

Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

January is National Birth Defects Prevention Month

Birth defects are the leading cause of infant mortality in the United States and account for more than one of every five infant deaths. The Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency would like to remind you that January is “National Birth Defects Prevention Month.” This year’s campaign focuses on helping health professionals and citizens take steps to reduce risks associated with congenital heart defects. It is estimated that 8 out of every 1,000 babies born this year will suffer from a heart abnormality.

Congenital heart and other birth defects usually develop in the first three months of pregnancy while the baby’s organs are forming. While no one knows why congenital heart defects occur, many are thought to be caused by a mix of factors (i.e., genes, behaviors, environment, etc.). Women at higher risk of having a child with a birth defect include:

- Those who take certain drugs, smoke, or drink alcohol while pregnant
- Those with certain medical conditions such as diabetes or obesity
- Those who take certain medications that are known to cause birth defects
- Those who have someone in their family with a birth defect
- Those over the age of 35

- Those who contract certain infections before or during their pregnancy

The good news is there are many positive steps a woman of child-bearing age can take before and during pregnancy to increase the chances of having a healthy baby. They include:

- Take 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid every day, starting at least one month before getting pregnant
- Do not smoke, drink alcohol, or use recreational drugs
- Check to see if you are current on your vaccinations and get all required shots
- Talk to a health care provider about taking medications including prescriptions, over-the-counter medicine, and herbal supplements
- Learn how to prevent infections during pregnancy
- If possible, make sure medical conditions are under control before getting pregnant
- See your health care provider on a regular basis

Why Folic Acid? Folic acid is a B vitamin that our bodies use to make new cells. It is essential in preventing some major birth defects. Folic Acid is so important that women should start taking it before getting pregnant. According to Jo Ann Wilzcynski, Prevention Services Director at the Health Agency, “We stress that women take Folic Acid before they are pregnant, even if they are not planning to be pregnant. That’s because approximately half of all pregnancies in this country are unplanned.”

It’s easy to get the recommended amount of folic acid. Simply take a multivitamin. Today, most of the multivitamins sold have the amount of folic acid that a

woman needs each day. Folic acid can also be found in leafy green vegetables, citrus fruits, beans, whole grains and organ meats.

The WIC (Women, Infants and Children) Program through the Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency can also assist. Kim Brown, WIC Coordinator states “WIC assists low income women and their children by providing nutritious supplemental foods and nutrition education. Women also receive the tools they need to adopt healthy habits in order to increase their chances of having healthy lives and healthy babies. And once their babies are born, WIC provides ongoing assistance for their children during their young, developmental years.”

Those eligible for WIC include: pregnant and post-partum moms, breastfeeding moms up to one year after delivery, infants and children up to five years. Women and children must meet program guidelines. The Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency holds WIC clinics on a weekly basis. The program also provides breastfeeding support and dietician counseling. To find out more about the WIC program and to check out the program guidelines, visit the Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency’s website at www.bhsj.org. To learn more about National Birth Defects Prevention Month and what you can do, visit <http://www.nbdpn.org/>.

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