

# Dealing With Birth Defects

About one in every 33 babies in the US is born with a birth defect. Some of these are preventable, but others aren't. A woman can still take steps to increase her own chance of having a baby with the best health possible.

## What is a Birth Defect?

Major birth defects are conditions that cause structural changes in one or more parts of the body; are present at birth; and have a

serious negative effect on health, development, or functional ability. Such defects are a leading cause of death among infants.

## What are the causes and risk factors?

Birth defects occur before a baby is born. Most of them occur in the first three months of pregnancy, a very important stage during which the organs of the baby are forming. However, some birth defects occur during the last six months of pregnancy, when tissues and organs continue to grow and develop. Most birth defects are thought to be caused by a complex mix of factors, including genes, behavior, and the environment. While we know the cause of some birth defects, and can address them accordingly, most others remain unknown in their origin.

From what is known, women have a higher chance of having a baby with birth defects if: they use certain drugs, smoke, or drink alcohol during pregnancy; have certain medical conditions, such as diabetes or obesity; take certain medications that are known to



cause birth defects, such as isotretinoin (a drug used to treat severe acne); have someone in their family with a birth defect; or are over the age of 35 when conceiving or giving birth.

birth. Most birth defects are found within the first year of life. Some birth defects (such as cleft lip or clubfoot) are easy to see, but others (such as heart defects or hearing loss) are found using special tests, such as x-rays, CT scans, or hearing tests.

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## What Can I Do?

There are things that a woman can do before and during pregnancy to increase her chance of having a healthy baby. Take 400 mcg of folic acid every day, starting at least one month before getting pregnant. Avoid the use of alcohol, tobacco, or illicit drugs during pregnancy. Talk to your doctor about taking any medications or supplements, including herbal, dietary, or over-the-counter ones. Be wary of any health conditions, such as obesity or diabetes, which can complicate fetal development. Learn how to prevent infections during pregnancy.

If you are pregnant or planning to be, seek prenatal care to help find some problems early in pregnancy so that they can be monitored or treated before birth. A birth defect can be found before birth, at birth, or anytime after

Birth defects can affect a variety of areas or functions, range from mild to severe, and require different treatments and approaches. Learning more about birth defects and what you can do about them is crucial. Visit <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/birthdefects/facts.html>

## HIGHLIGHTS

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**The Miami-Dade County Health Department's Women's Health program has the MOMmobile, a mobile health unit that provides prenatal and post-partum services to pregnant mothers. Services are free for those who qualify. Call 305-546-2986 for more information.**

**For more information about specific health defects and how you can address them, visit the CDC's Birth Defect Homepage: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/birthdefects/types.html>**

**For more health topics, visit [www.dadehealth.org/atoz/atoz.asp](http://www.dadehealth.org/atoz/atoz.asp)**