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## Steps to help prevent birth defects

Stanton, MI- Every expectant mother hopes for a healthy baby, but the sad and unfortunate truth is that one in 33 babies in the United States are born with a birth defect.

Birth defects, the leading cause of infant mortality in the United States, are abnormal conditions that happen before or at the time of birth. They can cause physical, mental, or medical problems with defects of the heart and limbs being the most common. Some, while devastating to the family, are considered mild, like an extra finger or toe, while others are very serious and life-changing, like a heart defect.

We know that birth defects, like Down syndrome or sickle cell anemia, are caused by genetic factors and that others are caused by certain drugs, medicines or chemicals. But for many babies born with a birth defect, there is no known cause.

This uncertainty can be unsettling, but the Mid-Michigan District Health Department (MMDHD) would like to remind women of childbearing age that they are not powerless when it comes to protecting their unborn child. While not all birth defects can be prevented, a woman can increase her chances of having a healthy baby.

One of the most important things all women who can become pregnant should do is take a vitamin with folic acid every day. Folic acid helps a baby's brain and spine develop in the first month of pregnancy when a woman might not even know she is pregnant. It can also help prevent birth defects such as congenital heart defects, cleft lip, cleft palate, and spina bifida.

Additional steps women can take to get ready for a healthy pregnancy include:

- Avoid alcohol, tobacco, and drugs
- Keep hands clean by washing regularly with soap and water
- See your doctor regularly and get an annual check up
- Make sure medical conditions, such as diabetes, are under control
- Receive recommended vaccinations
- Know your family history
- Eat a healthy, balanced diet
- Avoid unpasteurized (raw) milk and foods made from it
- Avoid eating raw or undercooked meat

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## 2- Help prevent birth defects

While pregnant, a woman can continue to help ensure a healthy baby by:

- Continuing with the healthy habits listed above
- Receiving early prenatal care
- If eligible, enroll in the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program by calling 1-800-26-BIRTH.
- Washing hands often, especially after using the bathroom, touching raw meat, uncooked eggs, or unwashed vegetables; handling pets; gardening; or caring for small children.

For more information on birth defects or folic acid, please visit [www.folicacidinfo.org](http://www.folicacidinfo.org) or [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov).

*Mid-Michigan District Health Department serves the residents of Clinton, Gratiot and Montcalm Counties.*

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