

MINC GENE SCENE

The Nurse's Role in Birth Defect Prevention

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Every 4-1/2 minutes, a baby is born with a birth defect. They are common, costly and critical. Birth defects can occur in any family, regardless of age, gender, socio-economic status, race, health history or education. **Birth defects affect one in every 33 babies born in the United States and are a leading cause of infant mortality and prematurity.** Birth defects also place a considerable physical, emotional and economic burden on individuals, families and society at large. In the United States, birth defects account for 20 percent of infant deaths, as well as 6-15 percent of deaths in children up to age 14.

A number of birth defects are caused by poor health habits that develop over time, well before a woman becomes pregnant. So the current focus of starting prenatal care after a positive pregnancy test needs to change to a **life-course perspective**. Therefore, every health care visit should be considered a preconception wellness visit.

While the causes of many birth defects are unknown, there are important steps women can take to reduce their risk of having a baby with a birth defect. Since many birth defects occur before a woman knows she is pregnant, and since over half of all pregnancies are unplanned, all women who have the possibility of becoming pregnant should:

- Take a multi-vitamin containing 400mcg of folic acid daily
- Eat a healthy diet, exercise and maintain a healthy weight
- Talk to a health care provider about any prescription, over-the-counter medications or herbal supplements that may be harmful in pregnancy
- Keep diabetes and other chronic diseases under control
- Avoid drinking alcohol
- Stop smoking and avoid second-hand smoke
- Not take illegal drugs
- Know her family medical history and potential genetic risks

Plan carefully – visit her health care provider regularly and have a reproductive health plan

January is National Birth Defects Prevention Month. Please join the Ohio Department of Health *Ohio Connections for Children with Special Needs* (birth defects information system) staff in promoting education and awareness activities. Most of birth defect prevention starts years before conception ever occurs. Therefore, nurses play a critical role in education and prevention. For more information, please visit their webpage at:

<http://www.odh.ohio.gov/odhprograms/cmh/bdefects/birthdefects1.aspx>

Essential Nursing Competencies:

- 1) Collects personal, health, and developmental histories that consider genetic, environmental, and genomic influences and risks.
- 2) Develops a plan of care that incorporates genetic and genomic assessment information.