

According to the Ohio Department of Health, approximately three percent of babies are born with a birth defect each year. In, Ohio this is approximately 4,500 babies per year. Birth defects are the leading causes of infant death in the United States and account for approximately nineteen percent of deaths in Ohio.

There are many types of birth defects. Defects such as cleft lip or palate, defects of the brain or spine, bones, muscles and internal organs and congenital heart defects can be detrimental to a baby's health. Genetic syndromes also exist, such as Down syndrome. Some birth defects are more life threatening than others. However, no parent wants to hear that their child's health may be in danger.

What many parents may not know is that the health of BOTH parents prior to pregnancy can affect the risk of having a child with a birth defect. Food intake, life-style choices, factors in the environment, health conditions and medications before and during pregnancy can play a role in reducing or increasing the risk of birth defects. Some things that a woman can do before and during pregnancy to lower the risk of her baby developing a birth defect include:

- Consume 400 micrograms of folic acid daily
- Manage chronic maternal illnesses such as diabetes, seizure disorders, or phenylketonuria (PKU)
- Reach and maintain a healthy weight
- Talk to a health care provider about taking any medications, both prescribed and over the counter
- Avoid alcohol, smoking, and illicit drugs
- See a health care provider regularly
- Avoid toxic substances at work or at home
- Ensure protection against domestic violence
- Know their family history and seek reproductive genetic counseling, if appropriate

In honor of Birth Defects Awareness Month, the Hocking County Health Department encourages all future and current parents to educate themselves and take steps to lower risk for the sake their own baby's health.