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Many birth defects can be prevented

Ithaca/Stanton/St. Johns~ It's a mother's instinct to protect her children. But did you know that a woman can begin protecting the growth and development of her child long *before* she conceives?

"A mother's health before, during and after pregnancy is critical to having a baby who is born and grows up healthy," said Dr. Robert Graham, Medical Director for the Mid-Michigan District Health Department (MMDHD). "If you are planning to get pregnant or are already pregnant, one of the most important things you can do for the health and well-being of your baby is to seek early prenatal care and to continue that care throughout the pregnancy."

This is especially important since an astonishing one in 33 babies is born with a birth defect, one that may have formed before the mother even knew she was pregnant. Luckily, your doctor can detect and sometimes avoid many of these problems in early pregnancy so they can be monitored or treated before birth.

A woman can also increase her own chance of having a healthy baby by getting plenty of rest, exercising moderately, eating a well-balanced diet, avoiding contact with chemicals that may harm an unborn baby, avoiding tobacco, alcohol and street drugs, and talking with her health care provider before taking any over-the-counter drugs. Women should also take a vitamin with 400 micrograms of folic acid daily before and during pregnancy, which may prevent birth defects of the brain and spine by up to 70 percent. Since 50 percent of all pregnancies are unplanned, it is important for all women of childbearing age to take folic acid every day, even if a pregnancy is not planned.

Other ways to prepare for a healthy pregnancy include:

- Knowing your family history and genetic risks.
- Getting medical conditions, like obesity, diabetes, or seizures under control.
- Washing hands often with soap and water to prevent infections.
- Talking with your doctor about medicine use (prescription and over-the-counter).
- Eating a healthy, balanced diet.
- Avoiding non-pasteurized (raw) milk and foods made from it.
- Avoiding eating raw or undercooked meat.
- Avoiding dirty cat litter.

For more information on how to plan for a healthy pregnancy, contact MMDHD Public Health Nurse Becky Stoddard at 989-227-3111 or visit www.mmdhd.org.

Mid-Michigan District Health Department (MMDHD) serves the residents of of Clinton, Gratiot and Montcalm counties.

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