



Preventing birth defects

Causes and prevention

The facts about birth defects

About 120,000 babies, or one in 33, in the United States are born each year with a birth defect.* What causes them? The answer is often complex. Birth defects are frequently the result of a combination of factors, and approximately 70 percent of birth defects have unknown causes.*

Steps you can take to help prevent birth defects

- **Taking 400 micrograms of folic acid**, both before conceiving and during pregnancy, is the easiest and most effective step you can take to prevent birth defects.*
- **Avoid alcohol and cigarette smoke.** A mother consuming alcohol while pregnant increases a baby's chances of being born with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), and smoking increases the baby's chances of cleft lip/palate.*

What are the most common birth defects?

- **Heart defects** top the list as the most common type of birth defect, affecting as many as 1 in 100 babies born in the United States. In addition, heart defects are the leading cause of birth-defect related deaths among infants.*
 - **Cleft lip/palate** is the second most common type, affecting approximately 1 in 700 babies.*
 - **Down syndrome**, a chromosomal defect, affects approximately 1 in 800 babies in the U.S.*
 - **Spina bifida** is a defect in which the spine fails to close properly during fetal development. About 1 in 2,500 babies are affected.*
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- **Prevent infections during pregnancy.** Exercise proper hygiene techniques as well as common sense.*
- **Maintain a healthy weight,** since obesity increases the risks for several serious types of birth defects including spina bifida, cleft lip/palate, and heart defects.*

These habits can help you or your loved one maintain a healthy lifestyle while helping to lower the risk of birth defects.

What to remember

Birth defects can be as varied and unique as the children who have them, so take the initial steps to help prevent them to reduce the risks. Birth defects are a heartbreaking topic to discuss, but it's an important discussion to have. Through conversations, people receive the education they need to prevent and understand birth defects.*

We're here to help you

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*The Baby Sleep Site; January is National Birth Defects Prevention Month; Available at <http://www.babysleepsite.com/announcements/january-is-national-birth-defects-prevention-month/>

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