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:


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.