



NATIONAL BIRTH DEFECTS AWARENESS MONTH

WHAT ARE BIRTH DEFECTS?¹

Every 4 ½ minutes, a baby is born with a birth defect in the United States. Birth defects are structural changes present at birth that can affect almost any part of the body. Birth defects can vary from mild to severe and may affect how the body looks, works, or both.

The ten most common birth defects in the United States are down syndrome, cleft lip (opening or split in the upper lip), atrioventricular septal defect (hole in the heart), absence or malformation of the rectum and/or large intestine, gastroschisis (hole in the abdominal wall), tetralogy of fallot (a combination of heart defects), spina bifida (spinal cord defect), reduction deformity of upper limbs, and reversal of the heart's two main arteries. Depending on the severity of the defect and what body part is affected, the expected lifespan of a person with a birth defect may be affected.

WHAT IS BIRTH DEFECTS AWARENESS MONTH?²

January is National Birth Defects Awareness Month, a time to raise awareness about birth defects and highlight efforts to improve the health of people living with these conditions. In an effort to raise awareness of the impact that birth defects have on individuals, parents, and families, HARC created the following infographic with information about birth defects, causes of birth defects, diagnosis, prevention, and resources in the Coachella Valley.

HOW COMMON ARE BIRTH DEFECTS?¹

Birth defects affect 1 in every 33 babies born each year

That is nearly 120,000 babies each year

This means that every 4½ minutes, a baby is born with a birth defect



WHAT CAUSES BIRTH DEFECTS?¹

Birth defects can occur during any stage of pregnancy. Most birth defects occur in the first 3 months of pregnancy, when the organs of the baby are forming.

The specific cause of most birth defects is unknown, but research has shown it may be a mix of factors such as our genes, behaviors, and the environment. Although there is still more research to be done to fully understand how these factors cause birth defects, previous research has shown that some things might increase the chances of having a baby with a birth defect, such as:

Smoking, drinking alcohol, or taking certain drugs during pregnancy

Medical conditions, such as obesity or diabetes, before and during pregnancy

Taking certain medications, such as isotretinoin (a drug used to treat severe acne)

Having someone in your family with a birth defect

Having certain infections during pregnancy such as Zika virus and cytomegalovirus

Being an older mother, as the risk of chromosomal abnormalities increases with age

It is important to understand that having one or more of these risks doesn't mean you'll have a pregnancy affected by a birth defect. In addition, women can have a baby born with a birth defect even when they don't have any of these risks.

DIAGNOSING BIRTH DEFECTS³

During pregnancy, women are usually offered screening tests, such as maternal blood screens or ultrasounds, to check for birth defects or other problems for the mother or her baby. A screening test does not provide a specific diagnosis but if the result of a screening test is abnormal, doctors usually offer further diagnostic tests to determine if birth defects are present.

It is important to remember that a screening test can sometimes give an abnormal result even when there is nothing wrong with the baby. Talk to your doctor about any concerns you have about prenatal testing.



CAN BIRTH DEFECTS BE PREVENTED?⁴

Birth defects can happen for many reasons and not all birth defects can be prevented. But there are some things that a person can do before and during pregnancy to increase the chance of having a healthy baby:

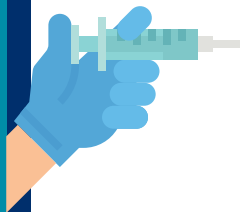
Get 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid every day

The CDC recommends taking folic acid, which is a B vitamin. If a woman has enough folic acid in her body at least 1 month before and during pregnancy, it can help prevent major birth defects of the developing baby's brain and spine. Women can get folic acid from fortified foods or supplements, or a combination of both.



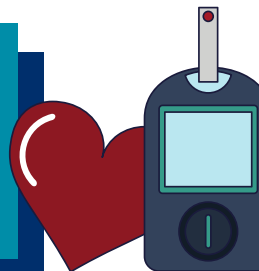
See a healthcare professional regularly

Visit your doctor when planning a pregnancy and start prenatal care as soon as possible. Talk to a healthcare provider about taking any medications since certain medications can cause serious birth defects when taken during pregnancy. In addition, talk to a healthcare provider about vaccinations to prevent infections. Getting certain infections during pregnancy can be harmful to the developing baby and can cause birth defects. Most vaccines are safe during pregnancy and some, such as the flu vaccine and Tdap (adult tetanus, diphtheria and acellular pertussis vaccine), are specifically recommended during pregnancy.



Keep diabetes under control

Unmanaged diabetes can increase the chance for birth defects and other problems during pregnancy. To manage your diabetes, monitor your blood sugar levels, follow a healthy eating plan developed with your healthcare provider or dietician, be physically active, and take insulin as directed.



Avoid overheating and treat fever promptly

Overheating can be caused by a fever or exposure to high temperatures. It is important to treat fever promptly as it can increase a woman's chance of having a baby with certain birth defects.

Avoid alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana, and using other drugs

Alcohol in a woman's bloodstream passes to the developing baby through the umbilical cord and can cause miscarriage, stillbirth, and a range of disabilities. All types of alcohol can be harmful during pregnancy, including wine. The dangers of smoking during pregnancy include preterm birth, certain birth defects (cleft lip or cleft palate), and infant death. Marijuana use during pregnancy may be linked to lower birth weight in infants.



LIVING WITH A BIRTH DEFECT¹

Babies who have birth defects often need special care and interventions to survive and to thrive developmentally. Early intervention is vital to improving outcomes for these babies. If your child has a birth defect, you should ask their pediatrician about local resources and treatment. Geneticists, genetic counselors, and other specialists are another resource.

RESOURCE IN THE COACHELLA VALLEY

Variety – the Children’s Charity of the Desert



Variety – the Children’s Charity of the Desert focuses on providing access to support and equipment for children in the Coachella Valley whose lives are touched by illness, disability or disadvantage. Variety serves children through three special programs that seek to provide long-term impact.

Freedom Program⁵

The Freedom Program delivers vital life-changing equipment and services for mobility, independence, and social inclusion for children.

This program has provided adaptive bicycles, specialized strollers, wheelchairs, and other mobility aids to children with special needs. In addition, passenger vans have been provided to community partners to transport children annually to after school programs, medical appointments, and treatments.

Future Program⁵

The Future Program and Kids on the Go! program focuses on providing socially inclusive experiences and activities for children with special needs and their families such as sensory friendly movie screenings, holiday celebrations, art projects, and access to special events.

Variety's annual toy drive, in partnership with area businesses, ensures children across the valley receive a gift of their own during the holiday season.

Care Program⁵

Caring Connections is a program designed to help families to support their child’s growth and health through developmental screenings from birth to age 5. Parents receive assistance and support in navigating the early intervention process including referrals to community partners for services they may need.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) such as face shields, masks, gloves, and hand sanitizer are available through this program to children with special needs and their families.

For more information about Variety's programs and resources, please visit: <https://varietyofthedesert.org>

Sources:

1. <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/birthdefects/facts.html>
2. <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/birthdefects/awareness-month/index.html>
3. <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/birthdefects/diagnosis.html>
4. <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/birthdefects/awareness-month/before-during-pregnancy.html>
5. <https://varietyofthedesert.org/our-programs/>

For more data and resources, please visit: HARCdata.org

