

## **Birth defects linked to a woman's health before pregnancy**

### **North Carolina Folic Acid Campaign and the March of Dimes raise awareness during National Birth Defects Prevention Month**

**Raleigh, NC** (January 5, 2009) – The North Carolina Folic Acid Campaign and the March of Dimes are joining the National Birth Defects Prevention Network to share the message that a woman's health, including her weight before and during pregnancy, is an important foundation to having a healthy baby who grows into a healthy child.

And, it's not just women who are planning to become pregnant who need to take care of their health. Unfortunately almost half of all pregnancies resulting in a live birth are unintended, and evidence suggests that a woman's health prior to conception is directly linked to birth outcomes. As caretakers, some women tend to make their own health a low priority, setting themselves up for chronic diseases later in life. The focus on women's health and wellness prior to conception is called preconception health.

Good health habits for everyone include knowing your family history, keeping regular check-ups with a health care provider and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Regular physical activity and a healthy diet are important components of a healthy lifestyle. For every woman from puberty to menopause, these habits should also include taking a multivitamin with 400 mcg of folic acid every day to improve the likelihood of delivering a healthy baby.

Focusing on attaining a healthy weight is important because over half of North Carolina woman in their childbearing years are overweight or obese and almost 47 percent don't get the physical activity they need. While many women may know that being overweight increases their chance for diabetes and other health conditions in themselves, they may not realize that being obese or even just overweight creates unnecessary risks to the baby's health. Moms who are overweight or obese have higher risk pregnancies. They are more likely to experience hypertension, gestational diabetes and preeclampsia – conditions that add to the chance of having a premature baby. Studies also show that babies of obese mothers are more likely to be born with birth defects like spina bifida.

According to a study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association\*, obese and overweight mothers were at significantly increased odds of a pregnancy affected by a neural tube defect (NTD), like spina bifida, compared with mothers of normal Body Mass Index (BMI). Alarmingly, there was a two-fold increased odds of a pregnancy affected by spina bifida in particular in obese mothers compared with mothers of normal BMI. This study highlights the need for preconception health programs focusing on birth defects and obesity prevention to work together to decrease the risk of NTDs in this population.

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“Improving the health of all women will ultimately improve the health of babies, which is why we’re working to reach women, their families and health care providers in our state with this important message,” said statewide campaign coordinator, Amy Mullenix, MSW, MSPH. “All women can take control of their health to stay healthy for themselves and to improve their chance of a healthy pregnancy, whether or not they are planning to have a baby.”

Good habits include eating smart and moving more. Eating smart means trying to eat more fruits and vegetables, preparing more meals at home, right-sizing portions, and changing drink habits by cutting out sugary drinks and replacing them with milk or water. Moving more means trying to get more physical activity by taking walks, parking the car farther away and swapping TV time with some sort of physical activity. A woman should talk to her health care provider about making healthy changes.

The North Carolina Folic Acid Campaign, a collaboration between the North Carolina Folic Acid Council and the March of Dimes, uses innovative initiatives to educate women about the benefits of folic acid, birth defects and preconception health. The statewide program’s mission is to improve health by promoting the benefits and consumption of folic acid by taking a daily multivitamin. Established in 1994, the program advocates that all women of child bearing age take 400 mcg of folic acid daily to help prevent birth defects of the brain and spine, called neural tube defects (NTDs). Membership in our Council is free. Visit [www.getfolic.com](http://www.getfolic.com) for more information.

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***About the North Carolina Folic Acid Campaign***

*The North Carolina Folic Acid Campaign is a statewide program whose mission is to improve health by promoting the benefits and consumption of folic acid by taking a daily multivitamin. Established in 1994, the program advocates that all women of child bearing age take 400 mcg of folic acid daily to help prevent neural tube defects (NTDs). Through its collaboration and partnership, the March of Dimes and the North Carolina Folic Acid Council have made significant progress in the campaign to reduce NTDs. To learn more, visit [www.getfolic.com](http://www.getfolic.com) and [www.marchofdimes.com](http://www.marchofdimes.com).*

***About the March of Dimes***

*The March of Dimes is the leading nonprofit organization for pregnancy and baby health. With chapters nationwide and its premier event, March for Babies, the March of Dimes works to improve the health of babies. For the latest resources and information, visit [marchofdimes.com](http://marchofdimes.com) or [nacersano.org](http://nacersano.org).*

\* Stothard KJ, Tennant PWG, Bell R, Rankin J. Maternal Overweight and Obesity and the Risk of Congenital Anomalies: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis. JAMA. 2009;301(6):636-650.