

Healthy baby campaign uses texts to reach mothers

February 4 2010, By MATTHEW PERRONE , AP Business Writer

(AP) -- Expectant mothers are getting a new tool to help keep themselves and their babies healthy: pregnancy tips sent directly to their cell phones.

The so-called text4baby campaign is the first free, health education program in the U.S. to harness the reach of mobile phones, according to its sponsors, which include Johnson & Johnson, Pfizer, WellPoint and CareFirst BlueCross and Blue Shield. Wireless carriers including AT&T, Verizon and Sprint have agreed to waive all fees for receiving the texts.

Organizers say texting is an effective means of delivering wellness tips because 90 percent of people in the U.S. have cell phones.

"Especially if you start talking about low-income people, cell phones are the indispensable tool for reaching them and engaging them about their health," said Paul Meyer, president of Voxiva, a company which operates health texting programs in Africa, Latin America and India.

Studies in those countries have shown that periodic texts can reduce smoking and other unhealthy behaviors in pregnant mothers.

Meyer said the U.S. program, run by Voxiva, will be the largest health-related texting program ever undertaken.

Under the new service, mothers-to-be who text "BABY" to 511411 will receive weekly text messages, timed to their due date or their baby's

birth date. The messages, which have been vetted by government and nonprofit health experts, deal with nutrition, immunization and birth defect prevention, among other topics. The messages will continue through the baby's first birthday.

Text4baby is expected to be announced Thursday morning by officials from the White House's Office of Science and Technology Policy. Government officials will be publicizing the campaign in speeches and promotional materials.

Organizers hope the effort can curb premature births, which can be caused by poor nutrition, excessive stress, smoking and drinking alcohol. About 500,000 babies are born prematurely in the U.S. each year, and 28,000 infants die before their first birthday, according to the Healthy Mothers, Healthy [Babies](#) Coalition. The nonprofit is among the sponsors of the campaign.

"The real scary thing is that we're an industrialized nation and we're not doing very well on infant mortality, and we know prematurity is a big part of that," said the group's director, Judy Meehan.

Currently the U.S. ranks 30th worldwide for infant mortality, according to Meehan, behind most Western European nations.

Researchers at the George Washington University have agreed to evaluate the effectiveness of text4baby by measuring health trends for mothers and newborns.

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