

# Prescription painkillers, widely used by childbearing age women, double birth defects risk

January 22 2015

march  of dimes®

**give your baby a great start**

**vitamins**

A daily multivitamin is the best source of folic acid, which may prevent neural tube defects (NTDs).





**diet**

Eat more foods that are naturally high in folic acid like green leafy vegetables, lentils, black beans, and enriched grain products (bread, pasta and fortified cereals).

As much as 70% of NTDs could be prevented if all pregnant women took 400mg of folic acid daily in the early months of pregnancy.

**weight**

Underweight women have a higher risk of having a low birth-weight baby.

Overweight women have an increased risk of miscarriage, complications of labor and delivery, as well as birth defects.

Avoid drinking too much caffeine, as it can pass through the placenta to your baby. Keep your intake to 200mg of caffeine, or one 12-ounce cup of coffee, per day.

Steer clear of raw or undercooked meat, fish high in mercury, and unpasteurized juice and dairy products.

**prescription or OTC medication**

Always check with your doctor before taking any new prescription or over-the-counter medications including herbal products and statins.

Women taking opioid-based painkillers in early pregnancy doubled their risk of having a baby with a serious heart defect.

**smoking, drugs & alcohol**

Smoking during pregnancy causes 20% of oral clefts.

Fetal alcohol syndrome is 100% preventable by abstaining from alcohol.

Legal and illegal drug use during pregnancy can lead to serious birth defects and babies can suffer withdrawal after birth (neonatal abstinence syndrome).

Steps women can take to help give her baby a healthy start in life. Credit: March of Dimes

More than one-fourth of privately-insured and one-third of Medicaid-enrolled women of childbearing age filled prescriptions for opioid-based (narcotic) painkillers between 2008 and 2012, according to a new analysis published today by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in its *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR)*.

Many women are unaware that prescription opioid-based medications such as codeine, oxycodone, hydrocodone, or morphine, used to treat severe pain, may increase the risk for serious birth defects of the baby's brain, spine, and heart, as well as preterm birth when taken during pregnancy. Use of these medications also can cause babies to suffer withdrawal symptoms when born, a condition known as [neonatal abstinence syndrome](#) or NAS, a growing problem in U.S. birthing hospitals.

Since half of all pregnancies are unplanned, women may be prescribed opioid-based pain medications before they or their [health care providers](#) know they are pregnant. "This highlights the importance of promoting safer alternative treatments, when available for women of reproductive age. We must do what we can to protect babies from exposure to opioids." stated Coleen A. Boyle, PhD, MSHyg, Director of CDC's National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities (NCBDDD). "

"If you are using an opioid pain killer, you should also be practicing effective birth control," says José F. Cordero, MD, MPH, a pediatrician,

birth defects expert formerly at CDC, and member of the March of Dimes Board of Trustees. "If you decide to get pregnant or do become pregnant, tell your [health care](#) provider about all the medications you are taking right away. You may be able to switch to a safer alternative." Dr. Cordero also urged physicians and other prescribers not to write prescriptions for opioid-based painkillers for their female patients who may become pregnant without a discussion of the risks and safer alternatives.

January is Birth Defects Prevention Month and the CDC and the March of Dimes are taking this opportunity to raise awareness about the risk of birth defects from opioid-based prescription pain medications during pregnancy.

In the U.S., a baby is born with a birth defect every four and a half minutes, and one out of every five deaths in the first year of life is caused by a [birth defect](#). In addition to the human toll, birth defects incur hospital-related economic costs that exceed \$2.6 billion annually.

"The CDC's Treating for Two: Safer Medication Use in Pregnancy initiative offers information to women and their healthcare providers about medication use during pregnancy. This initiative aims to prevent birth defects and improve the health of mothers by working to identify the best alternatives for treatment of common conditions during pregnancy and during the childbearing years," explains Dr. Boyle.

**More information:** [www.cdc.gov/treatingfortwo](http://www.cdc.gov/treatingfortwo)

Provided by March of Dimes Foundation

Citation: Prescription painkillers, widely used by childbearing age women, double birth defects

risk (2015, January 22) retrieved 20 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-01-prescription-painkillers-widely-childbearing-age.html>

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