

Certain birth defects more common among hispanics

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Unfortified corn masa flour may contribute to neural tube defects, March of Dimes says.

(HealthDay)—Hispanic mothers are at especially high risk of having newborns with serious birth defects of the brain and spine called neural tube defects, according to a new report.

Also, more babies are born prematurely to Hispanics than women of other ethnicities, the March of Dimes report states.

This report, updating a similar 2008 paper by the nonprofit foundation, also highlights the fact that a greater proportion of Hispanic women have babies each year than any other population in the United States, making it the fastest-growing ethnic group in the country.

"One of the things that caught our eye was, while Hispanics represent 17 percent of the population, 24 percent of [premature babies](#) are Hispanic," said Dr. Edward McCabe, [senior vice president](#) and chief medical officer of the March of Dimes, an organization aimed at improving the health of mothers and babies.

Hispanic women may be more prone to giving birth prematurely—defined as before the 37th week of pregnancy—because of risk factors such as being three times as likely as white mothers to be younger than 17 years old. They are also less likely to have graduated from high school and more likely to lack health insurance. The rate of preterm births among Hispanics was about 12 percent higher than that of white mothers in 2012, the report said.

Neural tube defects, which include conditions such as spina bifida and anencephaly, are malformations of the brain and spinal cord that can cause death or disability.

Experts suggested that Hispanic mothers are significantly more likely to give birth to babies with these [birth defects](#) than white or black women because corn masa flour is a staple of the diet of a majority of Hispanics. Corn masa flour, used to make tortillas and other foods, is not fortified with [folic acid](#), a B vitamin that can help prevent [neural tube defects](#). Wheat flour manufacturers are required by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to fortify that type of flour with folic acid, also called folate.

Also, Hispanic women are less likely to report taking a multivitamin containing folic acid prior to becoming pregnant, according to the report.

"This is why the March of Dimes is striving to have masa cornmeal fortified with folate," said Dr. Diana Ramos, an associate clinical professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Southern

California Keck School of Medicine in Los Angeles.

"Corn masa flour is not part of the standard American diet, so, since 2012, we've been working on this, making progress slowly," added Ramos, co-chair of the newly established March of Dimes Hispanic Advisory Council.

McCabe said the March of Dimes has launched a Spanish-language site, Nacersano.org, that offers information about the specific health needs of Hispanics. He said a variety of outreach efforts, including the website and new advisory council, are needed to help raise awareness in the Hispanic community about the need for folic acid consumption and prenatal health.

Other health literacy efforts aimed at Hispanics should focus on tackling smoking, obesity and type 2 diabetes, he said.

"By 2050, it's projected that 30 percent of the population of [women](#) of childbearing age will be Hispanic," he said. "Clearly, it's a growing population."

More information: The Nemours Foundation has more about [birth defects](#).

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