

**For Immediate Release:**

January 23, 2019

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**Health Experts Emphasize Five Effective Ways to Prevent Birth Defects**

Bismarck, N.D. – Every 4 ½ minutes a baby is born with a birth defect in the United States. In recognition, North Dakota Governor Doug Burgum has declared January as Birth Defects Prevention Month.

“Approximately 100 birth defect cases were detected at birth in North Dakota in 2017 and while we can’t prevent all birth defects, there are actions that can increase a woman’s chance of having a healthy baby,” explained Devaiah Muccatira, research analyst for the North Dakota Department of Health (NDDoH).

The NDDoH is joining with leading prenatal health experts to increase awareness of five critical tips to reduce the chances of having a baby with a birth defect.

- **Take 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid every day.**
  - Folic acid helps prevent major birth defects of the baby’s brain and spine.
- **Visit with your health care provider before stopping or starting any medicine.**
  - There are often benefits to continuing medications throughout pregnancy. Discussing a treatment plan before pregnancy allows a woman and her health care provider to weigh the pros and cons of all options to keep mom and baby as healthy as possible.
- **Be up-to-date on vaccinations, including the flu shot.**
  - Having the right vaccinations at the right time, like the flu and Tdap vaccines, can help keep a woman and her baby healthy.
- **Reach a healthy weight before becoming pregnant.**
  - Obesity increases the risk for several serious birth defects and other pregnancy complications.

- **Avoid harmful substances during pregnancy, such as alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs.**
  - There is no safe amount of alcohol that a woman can consume during pregnancy; exposure can cause major birth defects.
  - Smoking during pregnancy can cause dangerous chemicals to damage the placenta and reach baby's bloodstream.
  - The opioid epidemic has led to a sharp increase in Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS). NAS is a postnatal withdrawal syndrome that comprises a constellation of symptoms in newborns, including central nervous system irritability (e.g., tremors, increased muscle tone, high-pitched crying, and seizures), gastrointestinal dysfunction (e.g., feeding difficulties), and temperature instability.

For more information on birth defects, contact Devaiah Muccatira, NDDoH, at 701.328.4963 or [dmuccatira@nd.gov](mailto:dmuccatira@nd.gov). For information on services available to children with birth defects, visit the NDDoH Division of Special Health Services at [www.ndhealth.gov/cshs](http://www.ndhealth.gov/cshs).

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