A Main Course Of Knowledge With A Side Of Support, Please! 3 Tips That Help My Patients Prevent Birth Defects

By Lori Wolfe, Certified Genetic Counselor and Teratogen Information Specialist, MotherToBaby North Texas

It's pretty much a fact – ALL pregnant women worry…about what they eat, what they do, what they breathe. Basically, they worry about everything. That's simply because every expectant mother wants to do the very best she can for her developing baby. As a genetic counselor who runs the North Texas affiliate of MotherToBaby, I get calls every day from pregnant woman who want to know what to do and what not to do in order to have the best chance of having a heathy baby without birth defects.

Recently I was having lunch with my friend, Amber, who is expecting her first babies…Yes… plural! In seven short months, she'll become the mother of twins! As a first time mom-to-be, Amber is always full of questions when we get together. Nothing like having a friend who is an expert in the pregnancy exposure field, right?! "Lori, is it true that since I eat lots of dark green veggies, and breads and cereals, that my babies will not have spina bifida? I remember hearing something about how good folic acid is for developing babies. Is that true?" asked Amber. "Yes!" I enthusiastically replied. "Having enough folic acid in the first two months of your pregnancy is very important to help prevent birth defects in your developing babies. In fact, studies have shown that if you are getting at least 400 mcg of folic acid during your early pregnancy through the foods you eat, as well as your prenatal vitamin, then your babies have up to a 70% less chance of having a spinal cord defect such as spina bifida." The look on her face was priceless…pure shock! "70%? Really?! Wow, I had no idea it could be so effective," Amber answered. "Yes, I have been taking a daily prenatal vitamin since before I became pregnant. I am always careful to take one every day. So what else can I do to help my babies be born without birth defects?"

Let me break it down for all of the "Ambers" out there. What's thought to be the most common preventable cause of mental retardation in a baby? The answer – drinking alcohol during pregnancy. "And what is so crazy is that women do not need to drink alcohol when they are trying to become pregnant, and definitely not once they have a confirmed pregnancy," I explained. About one in every 100 babies born in America is affected by prenatal alcohol exposure and it is totally preventable by simply avoiding alcohol during pregnancy. "Amazing!" replied Amber. "I never realized so many kids were affected by their moms' drinking alcohol during pregnancy. That is sad. But I am good on this count as I have not had any alcohol at all during the last few months," Amber said.

"So is there anything else I can or can't eat or drink, or something else I can avoid that could make a difference in my babies not having birth defects?" she went on to say. "You are about eight weeks pregnant now, right Amber?" I asked her. "Yes. I am now about eight and one half weeks. Why?" she asked. "Well, another thing we worry about is hyperthermia," I told her. "Hyperthermia means increasing your internal or core body temperature up to 102 degrees Fahrenheit or more. When you become that hot, the baby inside of you becomes hot too. When the baby's temperature becomes too hot, especially in weeks five and six of a pregnancy, there is an increased chance that the spinal cord will not close, and your baby can be born with an open spinal cord defect like spina bifida. So we always caution pregnant women not to sit in hot tubs that are heated over 100 degrees, or to be careful to watch their temperature if they become ill with a fever during early pregnancy," I said.
"All of this is really good to know," Amber answered, as we wrapped up lunch. "I'm lucky I have you as a friend!"

I love making sure women have someone to turn to for answers when they have questions about exposures while pregnant or breastfeeding. In fact, during March when the world will commemorate the first-ever World Birth Defects Awareness Day, my lunch with Amber serves as a great reminder that my colleagues and I are there for all pregnant and breastfeeding women across North America.
If you have a question during pregnancy and breastfeeding about something you ate, drank or medication you took, call MotherToBaby at 866-626-6847. I may not be able to meet you for lunch, but a main course of free expertise over the phone, followed by a huge helping of cutting edge research to support that expertise, will certainly be exactly what

you ordered in your search for answers. And who knows? Your kids might even thank you for having such an appetite for knowledge one day!



Lori Wolfe is a board certified Genetic Counselor and the Director of MotherToBaby's North Texas affiliate. MotherToBaby aims to educate women about medications and more during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Along with answering women's and health professionals' questions regarding exposures during pregnancy/breastfeeding via MotherToBaby's toll-free number and by email, Wolfe also teaches at the University of North Texas, provides educational talks regarding pregnancy health in community clinics and high schools, and counsels adoptive parents. MotherToBaby is a service of the international non-profit Organization of Teratology Information Specialists (OTIS), a suggested resource by many agencies includingthe Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). If you have questions about vaccines, medications or other exposures, call MotherToBaby toll-FREE at 866-626-6847 or visit **MotherToBaby.org** to browse a library of fact sheets and find your nearest affiliate

Questions? Call 866.626.6847 | Text 855.999.3525 | Email or Chat at MotherToBaby.org.

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