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Experts Spread Message About ‘Preventable Birth Defects’ On First-Ever World Birth Defects Day

1 In 33 Are Born With A Birth Defect In The U.S. Each Year

BRENTWOOD, TN –“Many potentially devastating birth defects can be prevented,” that’s the message leading researchers in the field want the public to know as the world prepares for the inaugural “World Birth Defects Day,” which will take place on Tuesday, March 3. The commemorative day is being spearheaded by international maternal and infant health advocates.

MotherToBaby, a service of the international non-profit Organization of Teratology Information Specialists (OTIS), and the Teratology Society, both professional associations hailed as the premier sources for authoritative information related to birth defects research, reproductive science and toxicology, have partnered to help spread the message about alcohol and folic acid fortification – two major issues currently keeping birth defect rates high world-wide. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 1 in 33 babies are born with a birth defect in the U.S. each year.

Some of the most devastating birth defects are associated with alcohol consumption during pregnancy, according to MotherToBaby experts who provide free, evidence-based information through a toll-free hotline about medications, vaccines, drugs, alcohol and other exposures during pregnancy and breastfeeding. “It’s thought that Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) is the most common recognizable cause of mental retardation,” said Kenneth Lyons Jones, MD, MotherToBaby past-president and one of two doctors who first identified FAS in 1973. Children with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome are born small, have problems with learning and behavior, and may have other birth defects. “It’s totally preventable by avoiding alcohol during pregnancy, yet prenatal alcohol exposure still affects 1 in 100 Americans each year,” he added.

“Making sure women have access to folic acid regularly is another major issue around the world that could prevent birth defects,” said Mary Alice Smith, PhD, Teratology Society president and professor of developmental and reproductive toxicology at the University of Georgia. At least 400 mcg folic acid daily during pregnancy has been shown to prevent up to 70% of neural tube defects, according to Smith. Neural tube defects are malformations of the spinal cord that are serious and can be life-threatening. Two of the most common neural tube defects are spina bifida and anencephaly, and occur in about 1 in every 1,000 live births.

“Because the neural tube closes in the first month after conception, a time when many women do not yet realize they are pregnant, it is important for women to be taking folic acid supplements before pregnancy, or if they think they might become pregnant,” said Smith. She added that while some grains, like bread and pasta, are required to be fortified with folic acid in the U.S., ensuring more foods are fortified, like corn masa flour, could prevent even more neural tube defects. “The bottom line – we could all do more to raise awareness about this vital issue. The health outcome of babies being born today, tomorrow, and for years to come depend on it.”

MotherToBaby is a suggested resource by many agencies including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA) Office of Women’s Health. The public can be connected with bilingual (English/Spanish) teratogen information specialists at MotherToBaby and receive personalized risk assessments, education and counseling by calling toll-free 1-866-626-6847. The MotherToBaby website also houses a library of fact sheets on medications and other exposures during pregnancy and while breastfeeding located at www.MotherToBaby.org.

The Teratology Society consists of 660 members specializing in cell and molecular biology, developmental biology and toxicology, reproduction and endocrinology, nutritional biochemistry, genetics, and epidemiology, as well as the clinical disciplines of prenatal medicine, pediatrics, obstetrics, neonatology, medical genetics, and teratogen risk counseling. In addition, it publishes the scientific journal, *Birth Defects Research, Parts A, B, and C*. Scientists interested in becoming a Teratology Society member are encouraged to visit www.Teratology.org.

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