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Michigan women urged to take steps to prevent congenital heart defects in newborns

More than 333,000 babies screened for heart disease since 2014

LANSING, Mich. – To help prevent congenital heart defects, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) Newborn Screening Program is urging women to take preventative steps before, during and after pregnancy, including newborn screening.

Congenital heart defects are one of the most common birth defects and leading cause of birth defect-related deaths. Present at birth, the defects affect the structure and function of the heart. These defects can be detected with a pulse oximeter during newborn screening. Since April 2014, when this screening became a part of the Newborn Screening Panel, more than 333,000 babies born in Michigan have been screened for critical congenital heart disease.

“Michigan babies are greatly benefiting from a simple, painless screen done at 24 hours of life,” said Dr. Eden Wells, MDHHS’ chief medical officer. “With technology and treatment for these conditions improving, if diagnosed early, children with serious congenital heart defects have the potential to lead normal, healthy lives. “

It is important for parents to know that newborn screening cannot identify every child with a critical heart problem. Warning signs that all parents should watch for are: bluish color of the lips or skin, grunting, fast breathing, poor feeding and poor weight gain.

Some congenital heart defects have only a minor and brief effect on a baby’s health and some have very serious and life-long effects and can cause early death. Public awareness, accurate diagnosis and expert medical care are all essential for adequate management of these all too common and deadly conditions.

Studies have reported increased risks for congenital heart defects associated with maternal obesity, diabetes and smoking.

“The heart forms in the early weeks of pregnancy, often before a woman realizes she is pregnant,” Wells said. “Diet, genetic and environmental factors, life-style choices, health conditions and medications all can play a role in preventing or causing congenital heart defects.”

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As part of Congenital Heart Disease Awareness Week, Feb. 7-14, MDHHS is advising women who are pregnant or may become pregnant to:

- Avoid all alcohol and illegal/recreational drugs.
- Avoid exposure to smoke, chemicals and toxins, both at work and at home.
- Take a folic acid supplement throughout the childbearing years and check with their healthcare provider to confirm that they are getting adequate amounts of all the essential nutrients.
- See a physician prior to pregnancy, especially if there are medical conditions which require medications, any known metabolic conditions including diabetes, obesity, phenylketonuria (PKU), or a family history of congenital heart defects.
- Receive regular medical check-ups and learn about their family history and potential genetic risks.

For more information about Michigan's Newborn Screening Program, visit Michigan.gov/newbornscreening.

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