

Atrium Health Navicent Physicians Offer Tips to Help Prevent Birth Defects

January is Birth Defects Awareness Month

MACON, Ga., Jan. 17, 2024 – In observance of Birth Defects Awareness Month, physicians at Atrium Health Navicent encourage expectant mothers and women of child-bearing age to become educated about steps they can take to prevent and detect birth defects.

Birth defects — structural changes present at birth that can affect almost any part of the body — affect 1 in every 33 babies born in the United States each year and are the leading cause of infant deaths, accounting for 20 percent of all infant deaths, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Of the 126,400 babies born each year in Georgia, 3,800 have birth defects, and 1 in 6 infant deaths in Georgia is due to birth defects, according to The March of Dimes.

The most common birth defects are congenital heart defects, cleft lip and cleft palate, and spina bifida. Advancements in medicine and surgery have led to better survival, and more children born with birth defects grow up to lead full lives.

Birth defects can happen for many reasons, and although not all birth defects can be prevented, women can increase their chances of having a healthy baby by managing health conditions and adopting healthy behaviors before becoming pregnant.

“Prenatal care that begins early and continues throughout a pregnancy is critical in preventing and detecting birth defects,” said Dr. Misti Patel, director of [Atrium Health Navicent Women's Care Maternal Fetal Medicine](#). “If you are planning to become pregnant, it's recommended that you visit your OB-GYN to review your medical history, medications and lifestyle to make modifications that may lower the chance of birth defects. This can be done before becoming pregnant. Testing may also be recommended to determine if you are at high risk for birth defects or genetic disorders.”

Here are seven steps women can take to get ready for pregnancy, stay healthy during pregnancy and give babies a healthy start in life:

- **Get 400 micrograms of folic acid every day.** Folic acid is a B vitamin. If a woman has enough folic acid in her body at least one month before and during pregnancy, it can help prevent major birth defects of the developing baby's brain and spine. Women can get folic acid from fortified foods or supplements, in addition to a varied diet rich in folate.
- **Prevent infections.** Some infections that a woman might get during pregnancy can be harmful to the developing baby. Vaccinations, such as the flu vaccine and Tdap (adult tetanus, diphtheria and acellular pertussis vaccine), are specifically recommended during pregnancy.
- **See a health care professional regularly.** Be sure to see a doctor when planning a pregnancy and start prenatal care as soon as possible. Talk to your doctor about your current medications, as certain medications can cause serious birth defects when taken during pregnancy.
- **Keep diabetes under control.** Unmanaged diabetes can increase the chance for birth defects and other problems during pregnancy. Monitor your blood sugar levels, follow a healthy eating plan developed with your health care provider, be physically active, and take insulin as directed.
- **Avoid alcohol.** Alcohol in a woman's bloodstream passes to the developing baby through the umbilical cord. Alcohol use during pregnancy can cause miscarriage, stillbirth and a range of disabilities. All types of alcohol are equally harmful, including wines and beer.

- **Avoid smoking cigarettes and marijuana.** The dangers of smoking during pregnancy include preterm birth, certain birth defects and infant death. Quitting smoking before becoming pregnant is best. For a woman who is already pregnant, quitting as early as possible can still help protect against some health problems for the baby, such as low birth weight. Marijuana use during pregnancy also may be linked to lower birth weight. Women who are pregnant or considering becoming pregnant should not use marijuana.
- **Avoid overheating and treat fever promptly.** During pregnancy, a woman should avoid overheating and treat fever promptly. Overheating can be caused by a fever or exposure to high temperatures (such as getting in a hot tub) that increases a woman's core temperature. Overheating can increase a woman's chance of having a baby with certain birth defects.

As part of Atrium Health Navicent's ongoing effort to improve maternal health, the health system offers support to high-risk obstetrics patients through the services of a care coordinator who provides additional assistance for patients who encounter barriers to accessing health care such as transportation, access to nutritious foods, social support and more. Since its inception in late 2022, the High-Risk Obstetric Care Management program has provided support to patients residing in 15 central Georgia counties, linking them to available community resources and health education.

Physicians at Atrium Health Navicent Women's Care Maternal Fetal Medicine and the Level 3 Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at Atrium Health Navicent Beverly Knight Olson Children's Hospital play a critical role in identifying birth defects during pregnancy, which allows for early recognition and intervention following delivery. Babies diagnosed with birth defects benefit from advances in medical treatment and specialized care available at central and south Georgia's only dedicated pediatric hospital.

Atrium Health Navicent offers obstetrics and gynecology services are offered in Macon and Forsyth. To schedule an appointment, call 478-633-1821. For information about services for children, visit [childrenshospitalnh.org](https://www.childrenshospitalnh.org).

About Atrium Health Navicent

Atrium Health Navicent is the leading provider of health care in central and south Georgia and is committed to its mission of elevating health and well-being through compassionate care. Atrium Health Navicent is part of [Advocate Health](https://www.advocatehealth.com), which is headquartered in Charlotte, North Carolina, and is the third-largest nonprofit health system in the United States, created from the combination of Atrium Health and Advocate Aurora Health. Atrium Health Navicent provides high-quality, personalized care in 53 specialties at more than 50 facilities throughout the region. As part of the largest, integrated, nonprofit health system in the Southeast, it is also able to tap into some of the nation's leading medical experts and specialists with Atrium Health, allowing it to provide the best care close to home – including advanced innovations in virtual medicine and care. Throughout its 125-year history in the community, Atrium Health Navicent has remained dedicated to enhancing health and wellness for individuals throughout the region through nationally recognized quality care, community health initiatives and collaborative partnerships. It is also one of the leading teaching hospitals in the region, helping to ensure viability for rural health care for the next generation. For more information, please visit www.NavicentHealth.org.

About Advocate Health

[Advocate Health](https://www.advocatehealth.com) is the third-largest nonprofit integrated health system in the United States – created from the combination of Advocate Aurora Health and [Atrium Health](https://www.atriumhealth.org). Providing care under the names [Advocate Health Care](https://www.advocatehealth.com) in Illinois, Atrium Health in the Carolinas, Georgia and Alabama, and [Aurora Health Care](https://www.aurorahealthcare.org) in Wisconsin, Advocate Health is a national leader in clinical innovation, health outcomes, consumer experience and value-based care, with [Wake Forest University School of Medicine](https://www.wakeforest.edu) serving as the academic core of the enterprise. Headquartered in Charlotte, North Carolina, Advocate Health serves nearly 6 million patients and is engaged in hundreds of clinical trials and research studies. It is nationally recognized for its expertise in cardiology, neurosciences, oncology, pediatrics and rehabilitation, as well as organ transplants, burn treatments and specialized musculoskeletal programs. Advocate Health employs nearly 155,000 team members across 68 hospitals and over 1,000 care locations and offers one of the nation's largest graduate medical education programs with over 2,000 residents and fellows across more than 200 programs. Committed to equitable care for all, Advocate Health provides nearly \$6 billion in annual community benefits.

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