

NTD cases increase statewide, push program to work harder

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As Gov. Nikki Haley proclaimed January as Birth Defects Awareness Month, Jane Dean, South Carolina Birth Defects Prevention



JANE DEAN

Program coordinator, said the governor's support greatly helps the program not only because Haley is a political leader but also a mother.

"She knows the importance (of folic acid)," Dean said. "I think, women all of ages knowing that she is supporting what we do at the Greenwood Genetic Center for South Carolina is very important."

The SC Birthday Defects Prevention Program, which is based at the Greenwood Genetic Center, encourages women of childbearing age to take a daily dosage of 0.4 mg of folic acid to prevent neural tube defects, which occur within the first 28 days after conception.

Dean compared the size of the baby to a date on a coin when the defects happen.

Although the number of babies born in South Carolina with neural tube defects has decreased by about 70 percent since 1992, 55 infants were born with NTDs from Oct. 1, 2014, to Sept. 30, 2015.

This is a 31 percent increase as the average number of affected South Carolina babies was 42 during the three prior years.

Roger Stevenson, Greenwood Genetic Center senior clinical geneticist and SC Birth Defects Prevention Program director, said in a press release they do not understand why the number of NTD case increased.

"Are women not getting the message about the importance of taking 0.4 mg of folic acid before becoming pregnant?" he said. "Do they know the message but are not taking the protective dose of folic acid? Or is it just simply an unusual year with a greater number of cases which might be resistant to folic acid protection?"

Although every county has been affected by NTDs, the Coastal and Midlands regions saw almost a doubling of cases in the previous year. Ten cases were reported in the Upstate, which is a reduction, said Dean.

According to a press release, 33 of the NTD cases were isolated defects meaning folic acid could have reduced the risk. The remaining 22 cases had a NTD in addition to another birth defect, which is less likely preventable by folic acid.

Because the defects occur sometimes before the mother knows she's pregnant, Dean said taking folic acid through a daily multivitamin before becoming pregnant, whether trying or not, is key. Folic acid is also found in prenatal vitamins, green leafy vegetables and beans among other foods.

"You can never get too much folic acid," Dean said. "Your body will use what it needs for you and if you're pregnant with the baby."

Because folic acid is water-soluble, the body does not

retain it, so a daily dosage is necessary.

In light of the increase, a folic acid representative is joining the team next month. Dean said the representative, who will be based in Columbia, will travel throughout the state talking with doctors and nurses ensuring the folic acid message is heard.

Dean said the new team member will act like a drug representative and will hand out free vitamins and information in addition to speaking at lectures.

Dean said the representative will be a "shot in the arm to encourage the physicians to get this message."

Dean and the new team member will speak at various health fairs, bridal shows and conferences throughout the state.

In addition to increasing staff, the program will also increase public awareness campaigns including its new logo and redesigned materials. Dean said they are working with a company in Columbia to tailor information to the Hispanic population. She said the company will reach out directly to Hispanic communities to spread the word about folic acid.

The increase of NTD cases will be included in the program's continuous study of NTD cases that researches the cases in hopes of finding a cure. Dean said about 580 families are currently enrolled in the program.

"It's just going to make us work harder," she said.

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