

What is a birth defect?

A birth defect is a health problem or physical change that is present in a baby at the time he or she is born. Birth defects may be very mild, where the baby looks and acts like any other baby. They also could be very severe to the point where you can tell right away the child as a health problem. Some severe birth defects can be life-threatening. A baby with such defects may live only a few months or years. Birth defects are the leading cause of death in children less than 1 year old, causing one in every five deaths.

What causes birth defects?

There are many reasons why birth defects happen. Most occur due to environmental and genetic factors, but often the cause is unknown. Defects of the heart and limbs are the most common kinds of birth defects. Some genetic and environmental causes of birth defects are:

- Inheritance (passed down from a parent or grandparent).
- Chromosome gene defects.
- Single-gene defects.
- Multifactorial inheritance (many factors, genetic and environmental, are involved in causing the birth defect).
- Teratogens (an agent or factor that can cause a birth defect).

Why are birth defects a concern?

Some birth defects have a single abnormality, others have abnormalities in multiple body systems or organs. Birth defects may cause lifelong disability and illness, and with some, survival is not possible. Some birth defects, such as intellectual disability, are not treatable disabilities. However, many physical birth defects can be treated with surgery.

How are birth defects diagnosed?

Many birth defects can be diagnosed before birth with special tests (*prenatal diagnosis*). Chromosomal abnormalities such as Down syndrome can be diagnosed before birth by analyzing cells in the *amniotic fluid* or from the *placenta*. Ultrasound during pregnancy (*fetal ultrasound*) can also give information about the possibility of certain birth defects. However, ultrasound is not 100 percent accurate, since some babies with birth defects may look the same on ultrasound as those without problems.

Mobile apps

- [CDC's Milestone Tracker](#)
- [I'm Expecting Pregnancy App and Baby Guide](#)
- [Medical Dictionary and Terminology of Human Genetic Code and Evolution](#)
- [My Pregnancy & Baby Today](#)

Tips from our docs

This month, our healthy tip is brought to you by **Martin Hickey, MD**, our Chief Executive Officer.

Not all birth defects can be prevented. But a woman can increase her own chances of having a healthy baby by managing her health conditions and adopting healthy behaviors before becoming pregnant. This is important because many birth defects happen very early during pregnancy, sometimes before a woman even knows she is pregnant. These tips can help women get ready for a healthy pregnancy.

- Get 400 micrograms of folic acid every day.
- Avoid alcohol, drugs, and smoking cigarettes during pregnancy.
- Prevent infections.
- Talk to your doctor about taking any medications.
- Talk to your doctor about vaccinations (shots).
- Reach and maintain a healthy weight.
- See a healthcare professional regularly.

Additional resources

- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)
- [KidsHealth](#)
- [Medline Plus](#)
- [National Birth Defects Prevention Network](#)