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MUMBAI IS TALKING ABOUT

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'It is important to educate the public about the causes of birth defects'

As per reports, about eight million babies globally are born each year with serious birth defects that may be structural, functional or metabolic in nature. India too, has a high incidence of birth defects because of high fertility rates, unplanned pregnancies, poor antenatal care, poor maternal nutrition, consanguineous marriages and other reasons. In most cases, newborns with a serious congenital disorder who survive, have to live with severe disabilities for life.

Spina bifida is a Latin term that translates to 'Split Spine'. It is a congenital defect of the spine in which a part of the spinal cord isn't covered properly and remains exposed through a gap in the backbone. The condition can range from serious to very severe, often leading to lifelong paralysis of the lower limbs, bladder and bowel control problems. A neural tube defect is most serious when anencephaly occurs; the baby is born without part of its skull and brain intact, and eventually dies. In some cases, spina bifida can even lead to lifelong learning disabilities. The leading cause of spina bifida is Folic acid deficiency in mothers during the early weeks of pregnancy and it is one of the most common neural tube defects found in newborns. This World Birth Defects Day, Rohit Shelatkar, Sr Vice President, Director, Vitabiotics Ltd. UK talks about how to diagnose and treat spina bifida.

PREVENTING THE OCCURRENCE OF SPINA BIFIDA

Chances of having a healthy baby can be maximised by managing health conditions and adopting healthy behaviours before and during pregnancy. Folic acid is extremely important since it prevents major birth defects of the baby's spine and brain (anencephaly and spina bifida). These birth defects develop very early on during pregnancy when the neural tube—which forms the early brain and the spinal cord—does not close properly. Expecting mothers must start tak-



Rohit Shelatkar

ing folic acid at least one month before conceiving and continue to do so during pregnancy. In addition to eating foods with natural folate, expecting mothers should also include Vitamin B12 in their daily diet. An expecting mother should consume 400 micrograms (mcg) of Folic acid every day, along with 6 to 20 micrograms of Vitamin B12.

Additionally, women who are planning a baby are recommended to maintain a healthy weight. A woman who is obese i.e. has a body mass index [BMI] of 30 or higher before pregnancy, is at a higher risk for complications during pregnancy. Obesity also increases the risk of birth defects itself. Additionally, avoiding the consumption of harmful substances such as alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs during pregnancy is also extremely crucial for the health of the mother and her baby.

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REMEDIAL MEASURES TO TACKLE BIRTH DEFECTS

The exact causes of birth defects are often difficult to pinpoint and it continues to be a huge challenge for India's health-care system. However, the key is to keep educating the public about the known causes of birth defects, i.e. lack of folic acid and Vitamin B12 during pregnancy. Education and awareness can help empower people to take preventive measures and this is an essential step toward reducing the prevalence of birth defects. Preventing birth defects such as spina bifida is possible through the simple step of taking folic acid supplements.

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