

Health

Mission possible: Happy first birthday

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For the Times Herald-Record

Published: 2:00 AM - 09/29/10

Every year, nearly 200 babies in Orange, Sullivan and Ulster counties combined do not celebrate their first birthday. Infant mortality, defined as babies dying before the age of 1 year, persists as a public health issue. Some leading causes of infant mortality are low birth weight, maternal complications and accidental infant death.

The national campaign "A Healthy Baby Begins With You" promotes preparation for a healthy pregnancy beginning the day you are born. Being well-nourished, avoiding tobacco, and preventing and controlling chronic medical conditions throughout your life increase your odds of having a healthy baby and reduce the risk of infant death. (See "Healthy girls" below.)

Be well-nourished

Most American women begin pregnancy overweight or underweight and undernourished. Come on, moms and dads! Outsmart the junk food marketers and start adding veggies, fruits, whole grains and low-fat dairy and meats to your plate. Replace soda and sweetened beverages with pure water, low-fat milk and other nonsugary drinks that provide essential nutrients.

Did you know that a breast-fed baby for the first year of life is associated with lower rates of infant mortality? Once your baby eats solid food, make sure he never eats while lying down. Avoid offering foods that can cause a baby to choke, such as popcorn, raisins, grapes, nuts and hard candy.

Healthy foods shared at family meals right from the start teach kids to make healthy food choices for life.

Avoid tobacco

A mom's smoking contributes to two of the four leading causes of infant mortality: low birth weight babies and SIDS, or sudden infant death syndrome. The infant mortality rate is more than 70 percent higher for infants born to mothers who smoke. SIDS may also be caused by secondhand smoke in a baby's environment. Make your home a no-smoking zone before a baby arrives.

Get help quitting before you become pregnant. Quitting at any time during your pregnancy will improve your health and reduce risks for your baby. (See "Help to quit smoking.")

Prevent chronic conditions

We can't get around it! The same lifestyle choices that play a role in preventing diabetes, cancer, heart attack and stroke also help you stay healthy while pregnant. And they contribute to an optimal birth weight for your baby.

Never smoking, a healthy body weight, exercising 3.5 hours a week and a diet high in fruits and vegetables protect you and your future children. Take small steps every day to build these habits, and over time you will see results personally and for future generations in your family.

Controlling Mom's asthma, gum disease and epilepsy are also needed for a healthy newborn. Annual health and dental visits are best for early detection and early treatment.

Stillbirth is linked with maternal gum disease, so brush and floss regularly and get immediate dental care for persistent bleeding gums.

As soon as you know you are pregnant, see your medical provider for prenatal care. He or she will be your ally for having a healthy baby that begins with you.

Wishing you and your loved ones happy birthday for many years to come!

Caren Fairweather is executive director of Maternal-Infant Services Network Inc., a mid-Hudson not-for-profit dedicated to family and community health and wellness. Visit MISN at www.misn-ny.org. or at www.facebook.com/MISN.NY.