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Women's health and family planning vital for healthy babies

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By Jeannine Sato

Durham Connects

Experts agree. Planning for and spacing pregnancies is one of the most important ways to ensure healthy mothers and babies. And as a new mom of two, I agree. Creating a little space between my pregnancies made me feel healthier and stronger for the second go around. The three-year age gap between my daughter and infant son has made the demands of juggling two children much easier. It's no cake walk, but it gives me peace of mind to say that I only have one in diapers.

It turns out that improving a mother's health before she becomes pregnant, often called preconception health, has a major impact on preventing birth defects, prematurity and infant mortality. Adequate spacing between pregnancies helps mother's replenish nutrients in their body, grow healthy full-term babies and reduce household stress. A group in Durham County called The Healthy Parents, Healthy Babies committee is focusing on these areas to help improve the health of moms and babies.

"Women should schedule an annual physical with their healthcare provider to get advice on managing their overall health, as well as any chronic health conditions they may have," said Jessica Simo, coordinator for the Durham Community Health Network and chair of the group. "This is an excellent opportunity for each woman to also speak with her healthcare provider about her wishes to have more children and when. Her health care provider can give her helpful advice for avoiding pregnancy if that is what she wants. Just as importantly, her health care provider can also give her advice on planning for a healthy pregnancy."

Studies indicate that nearly half of all pregnancies are unplanned. Therefore, the safe bet is for all women of reproductive age to take care of themselves as if they could become pregnant at any time. This includes maintaining a healthy weight, taking a multivitamin with folic acid, exercising and managing chronic health conditions.

"There is only so much you can do to influence someone's health when they're already pregnant. We need to shift people's thinking about health well before they become pregnant," said Sarah Verbiest, executive director at UNC's Center for Maternal and Infant Health "If you show up to prenatal care when you're three months pregnant, you need to have already been taking folic acid."

A mother herself, Verbeist is passionate about preconception health, but she says the term can be a bit misleading. "We're not just talking about this because she's going to be pregnant. We want women in our society to be healthy and well [throughout their lives] so that their children will also be healthy. We have to help people shift thinking to understand what we do today can influence a pregnancy down the road."

One study published by the New England Journal of Medicine showed that babies conceived within six months of the last pregnancy were more likely to be born prematurely and have low birth weight. It is for that reason, Verbiest notes that most doctors recommend spacing pregnancies 18 months to five years apart to maximize a mother and baby's health.

Spacing is also important in reducing stress on families. If you're not sure about this, try caring for two or more small children simultaneously and you'll know what I mean. As a working mom, I'm glad to have spaced my kids intentionally and paid attention to my health before each pregnancy. Now as the baby cries, I can reason with the toddler. It's still tiring, but I feel good knowing that my good health is their good health.

Durham Connects is a collaboration of the Durham Family Initiative, itself a partnership of the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University and the Center for Child and Family Health, and the Durham County Health Department. It is funded by The Duke Endowment. For more information, please visit www.durhamconnects.org or call (919) 668-3279.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To find out more about preconception health and family planning, please visit these websites:

<http://communityhealth.mc.duke.edu/clinical/?/DCHN>

www.EveryWomanNC.org

www.beforeandbeyond.org

<http://www.ncmedicaljournal.com/Sept-Oct-09/toc0909.shtml>

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