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Maternal Obesity and Risk for Birth Defects

Margaret L. Watkins, Sonja A. Rasmussen, Margaret A. Honein, Lorenzo D. Botto, and Cynthia A. Moore
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CDC researchers found an increased risk for certain birth defects among women who are obese or overweight when they become pregnant. This study compared characteristics of about 1000 women who delivered an infant with and without certain birth defects in a five-county metropolitan Atlanta area between January 1993 and August 1997. The study looked at 645 infants with birth defects and 330 infants without birth defects.

What are the findings of this study?

Several studies have shown an increased risk for neural tube defects associated with prepregnancy maternal obesity. However, few recent studies have examined the risk for other birth defects among obese and overweight women. Therefore, the researchers involved in this study explored this relationship for several birth defects and compared their findings with those of previous studies.

This study had two significant findings:

1. Obese women (body mass index or BMI* of 30 or more) were more likely than average-weight women to have an infant with spina bifida, omphalocele, heart defects, and multiple anomalies.
2. Overweight women (BMI greater than 25, but less than 30) were more likely than average-weight women to have infants with heart defects and multiple anomalies.

What do these findings suggest?

Obese and overweight women may have a higher risk of having a child with certain birth defects. A higher risk for some birth defects is yet another adverse pregnancy outcome associated with maternal obesity. Obesity prevention efforts are needed to increase the number of women who are of healthy weight before becoming pregnant.

* An example BMI

A woman who is 5 feet, 5 inches tall and weighs 180 pounds has a BMI of 30; a woman of that same height who weighs 150 pounds has a BMI of 25.

BMI calculator available at: <http://nhlbisupport.com/bmi/>

For more information, visit www.cdc.gov/ncbddd

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