

# Brattleboro Reformer

08/28/2015

## Family Matters: Supporting prenatal development

By Chloe Learey

Hopefully, you are watching Family Matters, our half-hour cable show on Brattleboro Community Television.

The first episode was about supporting prenatal development and featured Amanda Pizzolo, the Maternal Child Health Coordinator at the local office of the Vermont Department of Health. We talked about a broad range of topics including nutrition, medications and other substances, exercise, weight gain and why all these things are important to consider before a baby is even born.

The amount of information available on any given topic, including pregnancy, can be overwhelming. It seems like everyone has advice on what you can and cannot eat and do. One of the most critical things to do is to identify a health care provider who specializes in pregnancy and birthing, and to attend regular check-ups.

As Amanda said several times during our interview, "When you are not sure about something, check with your provider." Hopefully this person can be a resource for answering your questions and sifting through the mass of information and advice that you invariably get. Many questions focus around what it is ok to eat, drink or ingest when you are pregnant — questions like "Is tuna safe?" and "Can I take allergy medicine?" and "Is one glass of wine bad?" are common, and highlight why this time period of development is so important.

Whatever a mother takes in can also be taken in by her fetus, and this can impact development. For instance, smoking during pregnancy is correlated with babies being born with a low birth weight, and the risks these babies face include infant mortality, delays in physical and cognitive development, and developing chronic diseases later in life.

Quitting smoking can be incredibly difficult, and pregnancy is often a strong motivation for someone to get the support they need to make the change. Sometimes what we cannot do for ourselves we are able to do for others.

Another big topic that comes up during pregnancy is general nutrition: what to eat, how much to eat, and whether or not a prenatal vitamin is really important to take. Amanda answered a resounding "yes" to the prenatal vitamin, pointing out the importance of folic acid in particular. In fact, taking a folic acid supplement when you are trying to get pregnant is key because it assists with the production of red blood cells and helps the neural tube develop into the brain and spinal cord. Since birth defects can happen within the first three to four weeks of prenatal development taking folic acid when you are trying to conceive is an important protective factor.

When it comes to "eating for two" however, Amanda cautioned against this way of thinking. There are general guidelines for weight gain during pregnancy and it is probably not as much as you think. This is definitely a topic to discuss with your health care provider so that you have an idea of your weight gain goal based on your situation.

Supporting optimal prenatal development is critical to giving our children the strong foundation they need to be successful in navigating the world as infants, preschoolers and beyond. We need to do all we can to support young families as they embark on this journey.

*Chloe Learey is the executive director of Winston Prouty Center for Childhood Development in Brattleboro. You can watch episodes of Family Matters by visiting <http://winstonprouty.org/>.*

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