PROVIDING PRENATAL VITAMINS FOR PREGNANT WOMEN

Offering prenatal vitamins to clients is a sound idea for Pregnancy Help Medical Clinics (PHMC) to consider as a way to improve services to their patients. Prenatal vitamins taken by mothers in early pregnancy can have protective benefits for their unborn child.

Here are some important things to consider:

- Often young women of childbearing age do not have healthy eating habits and thus, do not consume needed vitamins. Both diabetes and obesity are increasingly understood as major threats to health in the U.S. and medical evidence indicates that these conditions also pose significant risks for poor birth outcomes, including neural tube defects (NTDs).

2. Studies suggest that vitamin intake during early pregnancy can significantly improve the health of the unborn child. Among the benefits of multivitamin supplementation is reduced incidence of low birth weight and small-for-gestational-age births, cardiac clefting, and limb anomalies. Research suggests maternal vitamin D deficiency may be an independent risk factor for preeclampsia; thus, Vitamin D supplementation in early pregnancy is being explored for prevention of preeclampsia and promoting neonatal well-being. The vitamin of most recent concern during pregnancy is Vitamin B9, or folic acid. Folic acid derives its name from the Latin word folium, which referred to large-leaved plants rich in folic acid. Naturally occurring in spinach leaves, this complex acid was first synthesized in 1945. Since then, mounting scientific evidence has demonstrated its beneficial effects on the human body. Taken during pregnancy, folic acid is an essential nutrient for well-being and health and especially important for preventing neural tube defects.

The major NTDs are spina bifida and anencephaly. Spina bifida is disabling and anencephaly a lethal anomaly of the central nervous system that occur around 28-30 days from conception (6 weeks LMP). Folic acid may play a role in reducing the severity of NTDs when they do occur by increasing first year survival rates.

One study reports that a further benefit of folic acid is that its intake during pregnancy appears to improve hemoglobin levels, thus preventing anemia.
3. Many young women are not aware of the importance of folic acid and do not take multivitamins containing folic acid during pregnancy and or consume enough folic acid in their diets. This lack of folic acid may lead to poor pregnancy outcomes. Providing prenatal vitamins offers opportunities for PHMC nurses and health professionals to educate pregnant women about the benefits to their unborn of early vitamin intake. This additional piece of information may also help the pregnant mother recognize the personhood of her child as it allows her to nurture and protect her child through nutrition during her pregnancy.

4. Women often seen in the PHMC are in very early stages of pregnancy when their health choices are important to the developing baby. Providing vitamins at this early stage gets them off to a healthier start, since there may be delays in obtaining government services from prenatal care providers who prescribe vitamins.

What guidelines should be considered when prenatal vitamins are offered by the PHMC?

Generally, there should be a standing order or protocol in place from your Medical Director that authorizes the dispensing of vitamins. It is suggested that only a limited supply (possibly 14 days) of vitamins be given to encourage the patient to move into prenatal care as soon as possible. There are many sources of prenatal vitamins available, but Heritage House 76 now offers them in very inexpensive packages for PHMCs (www.HH76.com/prenatal).

Often donors like to give to such tangible items as prenatal vitamins, so consider mentioning this idea in a newsletter and its benefits to the unborn. Prenatal vitamins are a gift and service that encourages healthy habits during pregnancy for women and can help them begin to see the value of taking care of their baby from the start.

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