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## More babies being born with defects

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Dec. 26: Out of every 8 million deaths recorded in India each year, four million are babies. India's high infant mortality rate may be an embarrassment for the health ministry, but another alarming issue is the high prevalence of neural tube defects that affect the brain and spinal cord of the fetus.

In Chennai alone, around 12,000 babies are born with structural birth defects every year, according to the birth defects registry of India. Even as the government prides itself in providing free healthcare to pregnant women and giving out a pregnancy benefit of Rs 6,000, experts here say that pumping a pregnant woman with just vitamin and mineral supplements is not enough.

“Once a woman is pregnant, it is already too late to correct her deficiencies or severe anemia. The only way to prevent birth defects in babies is to treat young women at least three years before they conceive. The government should take steps to

provide compulsory folic acid supplements to teenage girls,” says Dr S. Suresh, who maintains the birth defects registry of India (BDRI), which collects statistics from around 700 hospitals across the country.

According to the BDRI, the prevalence of birth abnormalities like cleft lip, cleft palate, down syndrome, autism and muscular dystrophy has not decreased in the past eight years, even as several developing nations have managed to reduce the incidence of birth defects through fortified foods.

“Secondary prevention, by means of diagnosing the defect within the first 15 weeks of pregnancy and terminating the fetus is another option. While we hold life precious, expectant parents have the right to know if their baby is going to be unhealthy and choose whether to have it or not,” adds Dr Suresh.