

May is Teen Pregnancy Prevention Month

By Jennifer Howard

In 2007, there were 1,209 pregnancies to teenage girls in Orange, Ulster and Sullivan Counties combined, 600 of which resulted in a live birth. Nationwide, one out of three teens will become pregnant before the age of 20. Out of these pregnancies, 400,000 children are born to teen mothers every year. Teen pregnancy rates in the United States are the highest among industrialized nations and they are on the rise.

The vast majority of teen pregnancies are unplanned, leaving pregnant teens and their children at risk for a number of negative outcomes. Teenage girls are often four or five months pregnant before they confirm it or seek medical care. Pregnant women under the age of 20 are less likely than older mothers to get early, consistent prenatal care which increases the risk that their babies will be born too early or too small. Premature and low birth weight babies are more likely to develop infections, have breathing problems, display learning and behavioral difficulties, experience digestive problems, and die during the first year of life.

Since pregnant teenagers often do not realize that they are pregnant, they may engage in behaviors that place the baby at risk. Teen mothers are more likely to smoke cigarettes and to report having used alcohol and marijuana during the pregnancy, all of which can cause significant harm to the developing baby. Unsafe sex practices that result in an unplanned pregnancy are also related to contracting a sexually transmitted infection (STI). According to recent CDC reports, one in four teenage girls has at least one STI – an estimated 3.2 million girls in the US. Some of the STI's can cross the placenta and infect the fetus. Many can be transmitted to the baby during delivery. STI's during pregnancy are strongly linked to miscarriage, prematurity, newborn illnesses and numerous birth defects.

In addition to the physical and medical concerns, teen pregnancy places all aspects of maternal and children well-being in jeopardy. Teen mothers often find it necessary to drop out of school, which limits their future earning potential and causes them to live in poverty with their children. Teen parents are unlikely to marry and teen fathers pay an average of \$800 per year in support, further limiting financial resources. The children of teen parents are more likely to suffer abuse and neglect and to enter the child welfare system.

In order to improve the health of women and children in our region, it is essential to educate youth about the real-life consequences of unsafe sex practices. Every teenager, male and female, needs to know that any time you are sexually active there is a risk that you can become pregnant or contract a sexually transmitted infection - abstinence is the only 100% effective way to prevent pregnancy and STI's. Making positive decisions during adolescence will lead to better health for women and their future children. For information about the reproductive health resources or sexuality education programs that are available in your community, please contact MISN at 1-800-453-4666 or visit www.misn-ny.org.

Jennifer Howard, MA, is the Program Manager for the Newburgh Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention and Services Community Service Project, a program of Maternal-Infant Services Network (MISN) of Orange, Sullivan and Ulster Counties. MISN is a not-for-profit organization that coordinates health and human services for pregnant women and children.

