



News Release

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Birth defects at high rate subject of public forums in Yakima, Tri-Cities

Listening sessions scheduled for the evenings of May 13 and 14

OLYMPIA — State and local health officials will hold listening sessions in May to gather community concerns about high rates of anencephaly in three counties in Eastern Washington.

The sessions will be held from 6 to 8 p.m. on May 13 at the Sunnyside Community Center and from 6 to 8 p.m. on May 14 at the Benton-Franklin Health District office in Kennewick. The Department of Health encourages interested community members to attend. Staff involved in the anencephaly investigation will be available to listen to concerns and answer questions. The information gathered from local residents will be shared with an advisory committee that will consider what else can be done to prevent anencephaly and to find the cause of the high rates. Spanish language interpretation will be available.

Anencephaly is a rare neural tube birth defect in which a baby's brain and skull don't fully form in the first month of pregnancy. Babies with anencephaly die soon after they're born. The rate of anencephaly in Yakima, Benton, and Franklin counties is 8.7 per 10,000 births, compared to a national rate of 2.1

Department staff worked with local and federal health partners to look for possible causes of the high rates of anencephaly. The investigation looked to see if there were common exposures or experiences among women whose babies had anencephaly and how they differed from women with healthy babies. No significant differences that might indicate what's causing the high rates were found. The investigation used medical records to compare the areas where women live, environmental factors, prenatal care, vitamin use during pregnancy, and other factors.

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