

# Neighborhood Post

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## IN FOCUS

# Martin County pushes healthy pregnancies

Overweight women, obesity are growing concerns.

By Michael Reading  
Special to The Palm Beach Post

STUART — There are a number of risk factors that can contribute to an unhealthy pregnancy. At the very top of that list is carrying a child while overweight or obese.

Women who are pregnant and display an elevated Body Mass Index (BMI) at their first doctor visit tend to suffer from gestational diabetes and hypertension, pre-term birth and other ailments that can lead to increased risks for their babies. Overweight is having a BMI of 25 to 29.9. Obese is anything more than 30.

In Martin County, the battle against high BMI is one that has jumped quickly to the forefront in recent years. The situation has gotten so dire that the Martin County Healthy Start Coalition recently received a grant from the Martin County Board of County Commissioners specifically to address the issue.

"We started looking at the percentage of women with elevated BMI, overweight or obese, at their first doctor's appointment and we were floored," said Scott Berry, executive director of the Martin County Healthy Start Coalition. "Forty-seven percent of all women giving birth in this community meet the medical definition of overweight or obese at that first appointment."



Crystal Cruz (from left), Nancy Cirks, Nora Gonzalez and Audrey Brooks work at the Florida Community Health Center, which provides prenatal care to expectant mothers. Cirks is the nursing manager. CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

That number — almost half — worries Berry and doctors in the three prenatal care providers in the county because of what comes with it.

"Why this causes us great concern is we are constantly going upstream and tackling all the risk factors associated with negative birth outcomes, like low birth rate, infant mortality, etc. And, as you go upstream, elevated BMI is at the headwaters of a number of risk factors," Berry said.

Berry recently secured a \$55,000 grant from the county commission to focus on high BMI pregnancies. He said, beginning in early 2014, Healthy Start will have a full-time registered dietitian on staff in order to help guide women through a successful and positive pregnancy experience. He said the dietitian

will work with every woman who registers a high BMI during her first doctor visit (no income or age guidelines), take inventory of her exercise and diet and then prescribe an exercise and diet regimen through the course of the pregnancy.

Another component of the partnership with the county is appearances on MCTV, Martin County's television network, talking about the program and the important role it can play in the community.

Follow-up visits will ensure the mom-to-be is staying the course and giving the unborn baby the best odds for a healthy entry into the world.

"We want to make sure their weight gain during the course of the pregnancy is within acceptable parameters," Berry said. "There is an entirely

different chart than there is for a woman who presents at a normal birth weight. The commission sees this as being a community health issue."

In addition, about one-third of all women who give birth in Martin County are on Medicaid or uninsured, which leads them to skip prenatal care. When a woman who does not have prenatal care goes into labor, she usually goes to the emergency room, Berry said. The cost for that baby to be born averages about \$14,000.

"Many women, in that scenario, become indigent and that money comes from several different sources, including the Florida Department of Health and Children's Services Council," Berry said. "It will cost us about \$1,300 per client to take them through the program."



Chane Dunn is weighed by nurse Karen Verlezza at the Florida Community Health Center. Dunn is maintaining a healthy weight during her pregnancy.

### MARTIN COUNTY HEALTHY START COALITION

**What:** A Martin County nonprofit created in 1991 with the mission to provide expectant mothers with risk screenings, prenatal care, parenting support and counseling.

**What's new:** Beginning in early 2014, Healthy Start will offer dietitian services to pregnant women with an elevated body mass index, as part of a new program to combat high-risk pregnancies. Almost half of all women who give birth in Martin County are considered overweight or obese, which can lead to serious complications for the baby.

**For more information:** [www.mchealthystart.org](http://www.mchealthystart.org); 772-463-2888.