

Alive and Kicking

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(Staff photo by Tim Hynds)

Jennifer McCune holds her baby, Danny, who was born by emergency c-section after McCune noticed he wasn't kicking as he had been.

Last November, Jennifer McCune noticed a magazine story recommending that pregnant women monitor the kicks and movements of their unborn babies.

Little did she know that article would quite likely save her own baby's life a month later.

Due to give birth in December, the South Sioux City woman took the article's advice and each

evening spent an hour counting her baby's kicks. On Dec. 6, McCune, who was 37 weeks pregnant, noticed her baby wasn't moving as much. She counted only one kick during an hour that evening.

"At that point I called my doctor to see what I should do. She said to come in immediately," McCune said.

At St. Luke's Regional Medical Center, doctors hooked McCune to a monitor and discovered the umbilical cord had wrapped around the baby's neck four times. Just three hours after feeling only one kick, McCune gave birth via cesarean section to Danny, a healthy baby boy.

McCune's attention to Danny's movements meant the difference between life and death.

"I was scheduled for a C-section on the 14th (of December). They said he wouldn't have made it that long," McCune said.

It's stories like McCune's that women refer to when promoting Count the Kicks, a campaign that encourages women to track fetal kicks and movements during the third trimester of pregnancy. Reduced fetal movement can be a sign of trouble, and acting on that inactivity can reduce the incidence of stillbirths or other health problems, said Kim Piper, state genetics coordinator with the Iowa Department of Public Health and a Count the Kicks spokeswoman.

"There are studies that show a significant decrease of fetal movement is a sign of fetal distress," Piper said.

For Janet Petersen, the cause is personal. An Iowa state representative in Des Moines, Petersen had a daughter, Grace, who was stillborn five years ago. During delivery, doctors discovered a knot in the umbilical cord.

During a conversation with her minister while she was still in the hospital, Petersen learned that another woman from her church had a stillborn child just months earlier. That woman, Tiffan Yamen, and Petersen decided to do something so that other families might be spared the tragedy.

"No family should have to go through a healthy pregnancy and lose a healthy baby," Petersen said.

Through word of mouth, the two joined forces with nearly 30 other families who had experienced a stillbirth. Naming themselves Healthy Birth Day, they set out to find a way to let women know they could play a role in ensuring a healthy, live birth for their baby.

The Iowa Department of Public Health was able to secure some legislative funding for stillbirth prevention, and the group decided to promote kick counting, which Petersen had learned about from a public health campaign in Norway.

It would be a simple way for women to keep tabs on their babies' health.

"It's a great way to bond with the baby for mom and dad and for brothers and sisters. It's free and easy and available to everyone," Petersen said.

Through Teresa Heinz Kerry, wife of 2004 presidential candidate Sen. John Kerry, the group received a Heinz Family Foundations grant to pay for public service announcements. Those PSAs, featuring Iowa first lady Mari Culver and Iowa football coach Kirk Ferentz, have aired on Iowa radio for the past year. Similar PSAs are airing in Pennsylvania. The group hopes those ads are just the beginning.

"We're hoping to take this message into larger states and get the word out. We really want to expand this message," Piper said.

The group is working on brochures, posters and other literature they hope to make available to all Iowa doctors and other providers.

"We're trying to get every physician to tell every pregnant woman," Piper said.

Petersen said it's a message that many women haven't heard.

"Most women think if you've made it through the first three months, you're home free. The last trimester, you need to pay attention," she said. "My doctor never talked to me about counting the kicks."

McCune said that during both of her pregnancies, her doctor spoke with her about paying attention to her baby's activity level. But she never really understood why it was important and didn't realize that she needed to pay attention to more than just kicks. Now she plans to help inform other women about kick counting.

"It's a hard thing to talk to pregnant moms about," she said. "It's really normal when you're pregnant to have many fears. I don't want to scare them."

But a little scare is worth it, McCune said, when doing something so simple helped save her son's life.

"He's healthy and perfect," McCune said. Alive and kicking.

Stillbirth can be prevented in many cases if women are told the early warning signs. Typically, a decrease or increase (hyper-activity) in fetal activity is a signal that your baby is in distress. monitoring such activity by "[Kicks Counting](#)" is a no cost low tech way to heighten your awareness.

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