What is a birth defect?
Birth defects can be defined as structural or functional anomalies (e.g. metabolic disorders) that occur during intrauterine life and can be identified prenatally, at birth or later in life.

How common are birth defects?
An estimated 276,000 babies die within 4 weeks of birth every year, worldwide, from congenital anomalies, 1 in 33 new-borns globally have birth defects (2015).

What causes birth defects?
50% of all birth defects cannot be linked to a specific cause. Of the known causes, a number of factors like socioeconomic and demographic factors, genetic, environmental, infections and/or maternal nutritional factors can cause birth defects.

How can they be detected?
Identifying risk factors and screening during antenatal period and peri-conception diagnostic procedures like Ultrasound and amniocentesis can help identify birth defects early; although most babies are diagnosed only after birth.

Can birth defects be treated?
The exact support and treatment the child needs depends on his/her specific type of defect and the severity of the condition.

Can birth defects be prevented?
Most birth defects can be prevented through primary and preventive public health measures delivered through health services which decrease the frequency of birth defects.

Is microcephaly a birth defect?
It is a form of birth defect wherein the main symptom is a head size that is much smaller than normal for the child’s age and gender. It can be associated with other symptoms that can vary widely from child to child.

Does Zika virus cause birth defects?
Increased rates of congenital microcephaly have been reported in the context of the Zika virus outbreak in Brazil, beginning in late 2015. There is a strongly suspected causal link between zika virus infection in pregnant women and microcephaly in new-borns, however the link is not yet scientifically proven. It will take time and effort to understand the nature and biological basis of the association.

What do we need to do?
You can raise awareness and be well informed. Read more about birth defects, microcephaly and Zika virus on the WHO website.

For more information contact- secah@who.int