

## Preventing Birth Defects

# Folic Acid

## A Guide for Primary Care Health Practitioners and Educators



**T**he U.S. Public Health Service recommends that all women who are capable of becoming pregnant consume folic acid every day to reduce their risk for having a pregnancy affected with spina bifida, anencephaly, or other neural tube defects (NTDs).

**Taken periconceptionally, folic acid, a B vitamin, can prevent 50%-70% of NTDs.** Folic acid also decreases blood homocysteine levels and may reduce the risk for cardiovascular disease and some cancers.

## Did you know?

- Only 10%-15% of women know that they need folic acid before and in the first weeks of pregnancy.
- Women report that they are more likely to consume folic acid if encouraged by their health care provider.

## Timing and Dosage

- **Every day!** NTDs occur approximately 3-4 weeks after conception, before most women realize they are pregnant.
- **Regardless of pregnancy intention:** About half of pregnancies are unplanned.
- **400 mcg (0.4 mg) of folic acid every day** for all women who are capable of becoming pregnant.
- **To prevent recurrence:** 4,000 mcg (4.0 mg) of folic acid. Women who have had a previous NTD-affected pregnancy should plan their pregnancies so they can get a prescription for 4,000 mcg every day before becoming pregnant.

# OPPORTUNITIES AND STRATEGIES FOR YOUR PRACTICE

**T**he folic acid message is simple and effective and can take less than a minute: "Folic acid is a B vitamin that prevents certain birth defects and may reduce your risk for heart disease and certain cancers. Make sure you get enough folic acid every day through a multivitamin or folic acid pill and eat a healthy diet. Do you have any questions?"

Talk to your patients during visits such as:

- Primary and preventive care exams
- Gynecologic exams, including Pap smears, family planning, STD checks
- Blood tests for marriage licenses, if required by your state
- Preconception exams and negative pregnancy tests
- Follow-up exams (note any mention of spontaneous abortions, terminations, or recent deliveries)

**For more information: Contact your local March of Dimes, Spina Bifida Association, Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies chapters, or CDC at:**

[www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/folicacid](http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/folicacid)  
[Flo@cdc.gov](mailto:Flo@cdc.gov)  
1-800-232-4636 (CDC-INFO)