Preventing Birth Defects

Folic Acid

A Guide for Dietitians

The 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 (0.40 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:

The 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. Here are some of the ways you can get the full amount your body needs:

- Take a multivitamin containing 400 mcg (0.4 mg) of folic acid.
- Eat one serving of a breakfast cereal that has the full RDA.
- Add more servings of fortified grain foods such as breads, cereals, rice, and pasta to your existing diet.
- Continue to eat a healthy diet, including servings of green, leafy vegetables; citrus fruits, including orange juice; and beans and lentils."

Talk to patients during visits such as:

- WIC
- Weight loss/weight gain consultations
- Diabetes consultations

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
Flo@cdc.gov
1-888-232-6789

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10/2001

099-6650