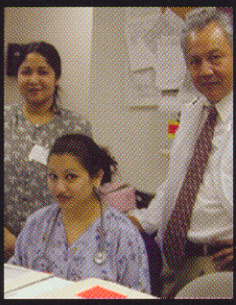
Preventing Birth Defects

Folic Acid

A Guide for Primary Care Health Practitioners and Educators



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 (0.4 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:

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

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