



YOU CAN HELP PREVENT BIRTH DEFECTS

Folic Acid: Helping to Ensure a Healthy Pregnancy

This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC – safer, healthier people.

For many years, scientists have known that folic acid can help prevent neural tube defects, which are serious birth defects, such as spina bifida – a disabling and sometimes fatal defect of the spine, and anencephaly – a fatal defect of the brain. We don't know exactly how folic acid works to prevent these birth defects, but we do know that folic acid is needed to make healthy new cells, like the ones that make up a developing baby's brain and spine. Taking 400 micrograms of folic acid every day, starting before and during pregnancy, can reduce the risk for neural tube defects by 50 to 70 percent. Unfortunately, CDC has found that most women don't get all the folic acid they need every day. Today we are going to give some helpful tips about folic acid, and why all women of childbearing age should take 400 micrograms daily.

Almost one half of pregnancies in the United States are unplanned, so it's important for all women to start taking folic acid now, not just when they're thinking about pregnancy. The brain and spinal cord develop during the first month of conception, a time when many women still don't know they're pregnant. Taking folic acid before pregnancy helps to ensure that a woman has enough folic acid in her body while her baby's brain and spine are developing. Once these structures have developed, it's too late to prevent these serious birth defects.

The Institute of Medicine recommends that all women capable of becoming pregnant consume 400 micrograms of folic acid daily from supplements, fortified foods, or both, in addition to eating a diet with lots of fruits and vegetables. There are lots of options to get the recommended amount of folic acid every day.

It's easy to take a folic acid supplement every day. Most multivitamins sold in the United States have the 400 micrograms of folic acid that a woman needs. Women can also choose to take a small pill that only has folic acid in it. All of these supplements can be found at most local pharmacies, groceries, or discount stores, and a woman doesn't need a prescription from her doctor to buy them.

Fortified foods offer women another option for getting folic acid. Enriched cereal grain products, like breads and pastas, are fortified with folic acid. But women need to be sure to plan their diet carefully to get enough folic acid from fortified foods. A bowl of breakfast cereal with 100% of the daily value of folic acid per serving is another easy way to get 400 micrograms of folic acid every day. Check the label on the side of the box; it should say "100%" next to folic acid.

Although eating a healthy diet with lots of fresh fruits and vegetables is very important, some people think that they can easily get all the folic acid they need from food alone. But that can be very hard to do – especially since the form of folic acid found in fruits and vegetables – called folate – is not absorbed by the body as easily as the form found in

fortified foods and supplements. For example, a woman would have to eat almost 12 cups of chopped broccoli, or drink 9 cups of orange juice every day, to get the same amount of folic acid found in one vitamin pill or one bowl of breakfast cereal with 100% of the daily value of folic acid. That's why taking a daily vitamin supplement or eating a bowl of breakfast cereal are the easiest ways to get all the folic acid a woman needs each day. Making it routine is also very important. Some women take their vitamin when they eat breakfast, while getting ready for work, or after brushing their teeth. Keep the vitamin bottle in plain sight in the kitchen or bathroom as a reminder to take it every day.

There's a lot more information about having a healthy pregnancy on the CDC website – www.cdc.gov. Go to the search feature and type in folic acid. And start taking 400 micrograms of folic acid today.

To access the most accurate and relevant health information that affects you, your family and your community, please visit www.cdc.gov.