Folic Acid in Pregnancy

Folic acid is a B vitamin that helps prevent *neural tube* defects (the part of a developing baby that becomes the brain and spinal cord) in a baby. It is important to take it at least 4 weeks before getting pregnant and through the first weeks of pregnancy. This is when the neural tube is developing. It is available in most multivitamins, as a folic acid-only supplement, and in some foods (see below).

When the neural tube does not close properly, a baby is born with a neural tube defect (*spina bifida*, hernia of the spinal cord, and/or *anencephaly*, absence of part or of all the brain). If all women took the right amount of folic acid before conception and during pregnancy, the number of babies born with neural tube defects would drop.

DIAGNOSIS OF NEURAL TUBE DEFECT (NTD):

- Blood test that shows a high level of alpha-feto protein in the blood. This test is done on all pregnant women in the first trimester.
- An increase of alpha-feto protein in the amniotic fluid.
- By ultrasound.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- Take a multivitamin with 400 micrograms of folic acid every day at least 4 weeks before getting pregnant and through the first 4 weeks of pregnancy as part of a healthy diet.
- If you have already had a pregnancy affected by a brain or spinal cord birth defect, take 4 milligrams (4,000 micrograms) of folic acid daily. Begin taking this amount one month before you start trying to get pregnant and continue through the first three months of pregnancy.
- Medications taken for seizures (convulsions) lowers the folic acid in the body and should not be taken with folic acid if you are pregnant or trying to get pregnant.

FOLIC ACID IN FOODS

Eat a healthy diet that has foods that contain folate, the natural form of the vitamin. Such foods include:

- Fortified breakfast cereals such as Total and Product 19.
- Lentils.
- Asparagus.
- Spinach.
- Black beans.
- Peanuts (eat only if you do not have a peanut allergy).
- Orange juice (from concentrate is best).
- Enriched breads and pasta.
- Romaine lettuce.
- Broccoli.

FOLIC ACID IS GOOD FOR MOM AND DAD TOO

In recent years, doctors have come to realize that folic acid is very important for everyone's health. Folic acid plays a role in the production of normal red blood cells. Folic acid may help prevent heart disease, stroke, and certain cancers, especially colon cancer. While this has not been proven, they suggest that many people may benefit from taking folic acid.

FOLIC ACID IS **NOT** EFFEECTIVE IN PREVENTING NTD IF THE PREGNANT WOMAN:

- Has high blood sugar in the first 12 weeks of the pregnancy.
- Has a high fever or gets sauna treatments in the first 12 weeks of the pregnancy.
- Takes valproic acid when pregnant.

A fetus found to have a NTD should be delivered at a hospital in a high risk neonatal ICU nursery with experienced medical personnel.

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