



# Media Campaign



## Implementation Kit

A guide to media outreach and placement  
for your community health education program.

Dear Public Health Partner,

Over the past few years, we have made great strides in spreading the word that folic acid can help prevent certain birth defects, yet research shows that many, many women still are not getting enough of this important B vitamin.

That's why more than 50 of the nation's leading organizations with a common interest in preventing birth defects have come together through the National Council on Folic Acid (NCFA). NCFA's mission is to reduce birth defects by promoting the use of folic acid, and its goal is to increase the number of women who consume the recommended 0.4 milligrams (400 micrograms) of folic acid daily.

Since the late 1990s NCFA has conducted extensive research with women and health professionals to develop a social marketing campaign to be implemented by NCFA members and their affiliates. What did we learn? In 1998, a poll conducted by the March of Dimes revealed that only 29 percent of women ages 18-45 years who were not pregnant at that time were taking a multivitamin containing folic acid. Also, focus group research conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) revealed that, while a growing number of women know that folic acid can help prevent birth defects, most were unaware that it must be taken before conception in order to have a preventive effect.

The good news is that, overall, awareness of folic acid has increased almost 25 percent since 1995. Our hard work is beginning to pay off! According to behavior change theories, awareness needs to precede behavior change for a conscious action, such as consuming folic acid every day, to occur. Although there have been increases in knowledge and behavior since 1995, the number of women taking folic acid has grown only slightly in the years since we have launched the media campaign. Now the challenge is to increase the number of women who consume 400 micrograms of folic acid daily, whether or not they are contemplating pregnancy.

Your efforts on the local level are more important than ever! CDC has compiled a community resource guide on folic acid, Preventing Neural Tube Birth Defects: A Prevention Model and Resource Guide, which contains useful information to help you plan and conduct health education initiatives and interventions in your communities. This resource guide can be ordered online at <http://www2.cdc.gov/ncbddd/faorder> or by calling 770-488-7160. The full text of the document is also available at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/folicacid/ntd/cover.htm>.

An effort of this magnitude requires a number of components; this media campaign is only one of them. NCFA is also conducting educational campaigns for health care providers, pursuing community education efforts, and working to increase the levels of food fortification. One of our biggest strategies, however, is to execute a nationwide mass media campaign. That's where you get involved.

Although we are implementing the media campaign on a national level, its success is dependent upon local involvement and action. This guide was designed to help you, our local partners, implement the media aspect of the campaign, while also providing you with materials and tips on placing public service ads and developing news stories for local media. Take advantage of the opportunity to tailor the products with local statistics and information. Reporters are interested in topics that are important to their viewers, listeners, and readers, and it is up to you to make that local connection. The kit includes chapters on the following:

- Campaign Background
- Tips for Working With the Media
- Preparation for the Interview
- A Guide to Placing Public Service Materials
- Appendices (including materials for local customization)

These materials and more information on the campaign and NCFAs can also be found on the CDC Web site at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/folicacid/folcamp.htm>. If you have any questions about the media campaign or birth defects prevention, please call CDC's toll-free number, 1-888-232-5929, or e-mail us at [Flo@cdc.gov](mailto:Flo@cdc.gov).

Thank you for helping to spread the important message: Take Folic Acid Now To Prevent Birth Defects.

Sincerely,

The Prevention and Health Communication Team  
National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities

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# 1. Campaign Background

## 1.1. Introduction

The National Folic Acid Campaign is a collaborative effort of organizations that belong to the National Council on Folic Acid (NCFA), a coalition led by the National Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Coalition. This group includes government agencies, non-profit organizations, health professional associations, and community health coalitions—all sharing a common interest in reducing birth defects through increased folic acid intake.

The mission of NCFA is to reduce birth defects by promoting the use of folic acid. The goal is to increase the proportion of women who consume 0.4 milligrams (400 micrograms) of folic acid daily, in accordance with the 1992 U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS) recommendation. NCFA has identified three main strategies to accomplish this goal:

- Increase the proportion of women who understand that consuming folic acid daily can help prevent birth defects.
- Make folic acid awareness efforts a routine and standard part of the delivery of preventive health care services to women.
- Increase the level and availability of folic acid in food.

To deliver consistent messages about the use of folic acid directly to women, NCFA developed a multi-phased social marketing campaign using mass media, begun in 1998. A social marketing approach combines a detailed situation analysis with extensive audience research involving who they are, what they know, think, and do. The goal of social marketing is to create positive behavior change, in this case, taking folic acid every day. Throughout the campaign, members have evaluated the effectiveness of folic acid projects and programs and shared lessons learned.

## 1.2. A Call to Action

In 1992, the USPHS recommended that all women of childbearing age who are capable of becoming pregnant should consume 0.4 milligrams (400 micrograms) of the B vitamin folic acid per day. The recommendation followed conclusive scientific evidence that, if all women consumed 400 micrograms of folic acid daily, the frequency of neural tube defects would be reduced between 50 and 70 percent. The outcome would be the prevention of neural tube defects in many of the 4,000 pregnancies affected each year.

Neural tube defects (NTDs) are common, serious birth defects that affect the spine (spina bifida) and brain (anencephaly). Despite the fact that 1 out of every 1,000 pregnancies in the United States is affected by an NTD, public knowledge about NTDs and about folic acid is still limited. In the first 8 years since the USPHS recommendations, more than 30,000 babies have been born with NTDs.

Through the efforts of many organizations, awareness of folic acid among women of childbearing age has risen significantly, from 52 percent in 1995 to 75 percent in 2000, but consumption of folic acid has lagged behind awareness. In 2000, only 34 percent of women reported consuming the recommended daily amount of folic acid, compared to 28 percent in 1995. We have begun to build awareness, the first step to influencing behavior change. Now the challenge is to increase the number of women who consume 400 micrograms (0.4 milligrams) of folic acid daily, whether or not they are contemplating pregnancy.

### **1.3. A Social Marketing Approach**

We have achieved this shift in awareness by building our outreach efforts on a foundation of comprehensive research of women of childbearing age. In March 1998, focus group research was conducted with women carefully divided into distinct “segments.” These audience segments were defined by demographic factors such as age, income, and education. However, simply dividing women into groups on the basis of their “statistics” alone is not enough. Our strategies must pay attention to psychographic factors—personal attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs—that influence all behaviors.

At different times in our lives, we are in different stages of “readiness to change.” In times of transition, we are more open to new messages and new beliefs. In times of stasis, we are more resistant. In any campaign seeking to influence behavior, it is important to recognize at what stage your target audience is and how best to move them along to the next stage.

For instance, two women who share similar economic and cultural backgrounds may respond very differently to folic acid messages if one of them is planning a family, and the other is not thinking of a pregnancy now or any time in the near future. The woman planning a pregnancy is much more open to messages about behavior change because she is contemplating some serious life choices, and she is prepared to make appropriate adjustments in her behavior and beliefs. The woman not thinking about pregnancy, however, is not planning to make serious alterations in her life anytime soon and is more resistant to an outside influence. A folic acid campaign may be able to convince the first woman to go to her drugstore, buy a supplement, and start taking it daily. For the woman in our example who is not considering a pregnancy, the first step may be just to get her to start *thinking* about the idea of folic acid.

## 1.4. A Research-Driven Campaign

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention spearheaded a series of consumer research efforts to identify and understand the primary target audience and to develop meaningful messages and products to reach them. We used three different levels of research to understand the needs, values, and motivating factors of women who might become pregnant and should be taking folic acid:

1. *Formative Research*, the first step in our process, was conducted among women who might get pregnant and among doctors, nurses, and nutritionists. Through a series of focus groups conducted across the country, we interviewed women about their beliefs and nutritional habits and about their attitudes towards pregnancy, birth defects, and folic acid. We interviewed Spanish-speaking women and English-speaking women, women who were planning a pregnancy and women who were not planning a pregnancy. Based on this formative research, we identified two separate audiences: women who are planning to get pregnant and are open to messages about pregnancy (“contemplators”), and women who are not planning to get pregnant and are more resistant to pregnancy messages (“non-contemplators”).
2. *Concept Research*, the second step in our research process, showed a series of possible creative concepts to the contemplators and the non-contemplators. In a series of focus groups, women responded to a variety of ideas that might or might not motivate them to take folic acid. The two strongest concepts, one for each audience, were selected to become creative campaigns.
3. *Creative Pre-Test* was the final step of our research process. Before producing any materials, we conducted a series of pre-tests for both the contemplators and non-contemplators. In a series of one-on-one interviews, we introduced women to some of the TV and print ads that were developed to ensure that the materials were effective in communicating our key strategic message.

## 1.5. The Media Campaign

Mass media—national television, radio, print, and public relations efforts—are the best way to reach the most people quickly. They represent an integral part of the efforts of the public education campaign.

Using the formative research, CDC developed two sets of materials for NCFAs and their affiliates. These products speak to the two very different segments within the target audience. The “Before You Know It” materials and messages target “contemplators,” women currently open to thinking about or planning a pregnancy. Focus group research has shown that, of the two groups, these women are most receptive to the folic acid message and, therefore, are most likely to respond to our campaign. The “Before You Know It” message and materials are designed to educate these women about the benefits of folic acid and the immediate impact that



taking it can have. The second set of materials and messages, titled “Ready, Not”, is geared towards “non-contemplators,” women who are not currently thinking about having a baby. This message is much simpler—“even if you are not ready to have a baby, your body is. That is why it is important to be prepared, and start working folic acid into your daily routine today.”

Materials supporting and conveying these central themes have been designed, and many are provided, ready for local customization, in this kit for your use, including the following:

- Pitch letters and scripts
- Press release and media alerts
- Background materials
- Sample interview scripts to prepare you
- Follow-up materials

### **1.5.1. Contemplators**

To effectively reach this audience, CDC tested many folic acid messages to determine which concepts were most relevant and motivating. Because of their attitude toward pregnancy, the contemplators were “ready to change” and were very receptive to messages about folic acid. While their overall awareness of folic acid was high, some critical knowledge gaps were identified. Many women still did not know that folic acid can prevent birth defects, and even more women were unaware that folic acid must be taken **before** pregnancy to have a preventive effect. For the contemplators, this last fact forms the central platform of the campaign.

Hispanic women at all stages of contemplation are included in the contemplators group. Research found that, as a group, Hispanic women are more open to discussing the possibility of becoming pregnant, even if they are not actively planning pregnancy at the time. Hispanic women also have a higher risk of giving birth to children with spina bifida and anencephaly. The biggest barriers for these women appear to be misinformation and lack of knowledge about folic acid. They are also less likely to be taking vitamin supplements in general.

#### **“Before You Know It” (PSA and Support Materials)**

The “Before You Know It” mass media and support materials are available in both English and Spanish. Consumer research has proven this theme to be highly motivating and strategically on-target, clearly conveying the message that women should take folic acid **before** they are pregnant. Materials include:

- Television PSA
- “Before You Hear It” radio PSA
- Print ads
- Brochure
- Brochure card

- Posters

### **1.5.2. Non-Contemplators**

Non-contemplators, women who are not currently thinking about or planning a pregnancy, are more resistant to pregnancy-related messages and are harder to inform. However, since nearly half of all pregnancies are unplanned, this group cannot be overlooked. More intense audience testing found that, although non-contemplators are not currently planning a pregnancy, they are very conscious of their health and well-being. It is important to remember that they are open to messages that will help them have control over their body and lives.

#### **“Ready, Not” PSA and Support Materials**

Materials in the “Ready, Not” series are available in English to support your efforts to reach this audience. Further consumer research found the theme of Ready, Not to be an effective message for building awareness of folic acid among women who are not currently thinking about the family they may have in the future. Materials include:

- Television PSA
- Radio PSA
- Print ad
- Brochure
- Poster

Both contemplator and non-contemplator materials can be ordered free of charge at <http://www2.cdc.gov/ncbddd/faorder> or by emailing Flo@cdc.gov.

## **1.6. Additional Partner Resources**

### **March of Dimes PSA Campaigns**

As part of their multi-year commitment to folic acid outreach and education, the March of Dimes developed a range of broadcast and print public service announcements in English and Spanish. These were distributed by the local chapters of March of Dimes as part of its folic acid campaign. March of Dimes materials are available through their website, <http://www.marchofdimes.org/> or through their toll-free number, 1-888-MODIMES.

## 1.7. A Variety of Media

CDC and the March of Dimes developed campaign materials for many different types of media. You will probably deal with local TV and radio stations and newspapers. Remember the fundamental differences between these media to be most effective when working with them.

- By targeting specific sections of a newspaper with appropriate stories and ideas, you can get in-depth coverage of your issue. Community or weekly newspapers tend to highlight stories such as a folic acid awareness campaign.
- Radio and TV stations have more finite resources and “time” for local news, usually 5 minutes for radio and half an hour for local TV news. Local talk shows on TV and radio, however, offer more comprehensive coverage and are also good targets.

Regardless of the format, reporters, producers, and editors share one common trait: They want to bring important news to their local readers, viewers, and listeners. Therefore, a local story is always a plus. While the national campaign is the umbrella, be sure to tell the media why this issue is important *in your area* by using local resources to help tell the story when possible.

When asking the media to use a public service announcement, remember that, although most media honor their community service commitment, they receive several requests. You may find that smaller stations and newspapers are more approachable, but, no matter the size of the media outlet, remember that personal contact is the best way to get their attention and convince them to use your material.

Finally, when selecting which media outlet to approach, consider the audience. This will help you prioritize your efforts and get the most effective results. For example, women of reproductive age are often readers of women’s magazines. NCFA will be approaching national women’s magazines, so you may want to think about any regional or local magazines that address women’s interests.

The following sections of this kit provide further guidance and advice on working with the news media and placing public service materials. If you have experience in these areas, we hope that it will serve as a refresher course. If you are not experienced, we hope that it will give you the basic knowledge and tools to conduct media outreach. Regardless, you already have something that a media pro will tell you is one of the most important assets, a belief in your cause.

## 2. Tips for Working with the Media

Media is a powerful way to help you draw attention to the goal of promoting folic acid to reduce birth defects. They are in a unique position to communicate specific messages to your target audience, such as the need to take folic acid before getting pregnant. Getting publicity will add to the success of your program and increase recognition of your organization as a sponsor of this information.

Publicity can also extend the effect of your activities beyond the program. A special event, such as a folic acid awareness day or other local community program, can be preceded and followed by radio, television, and newspaper publicity. Media coverage of promotional activities not only encourages participation, but also gets your message out to more people than might be reached in person by such activities.

If you have media experience, you already know how to effectively communicate your message through the news media. If you have not worked much with the media, there may be someone else in your organization with experience. If possible, find and work with that person. Here are some guidelines that can help you to establish contacts and obtain coverage.

### 2.1. Definitions of News

The secret to gaining publicity is understanding the news media and “what makes news.” Once you have a basic appreciation of the needs of the news media, you can then use a variety of story angles, or “news hooks,” to interest your media contacts in a story about folic acid.

Working with the media is a bit like social marketing. You have to understand your audience before you can develop messages to which they will be most receptive. The good news is that, since we are exposed to “news” every day as consumers, most of us already have a basic understanding of the news media. Don’t downplay this experience. Think about what you already watch, listen to, and read for local news and information. You will note some basic facts about local media and how they deliver news to their constituents.

- **Newspapers** may be published daily or weekly. They are the primary deliverers of in-depth news in communities. They cover many local events and provide local perspective on national news. Because of their time frame, weekly papers tend to be less dominated by “breaking news,” offering more “feature” information. Daily papers also run features, usually on specific days of the week, such as a mid-week health section.
- **Television stations** usually allot 30 minutes to 1 hour for local news programming several times during the day. Given these daily airings and the visual nature of the medium, they concentrate on breaking news, supported by video footage and reports gathered by mobile crews. With the exception of some local cable stations, these programs cater to universal interests and reach a broad audience.

- **Radio stations**, which proliferate on the local level, are the most diverse in terms of programming formats, catering to specific audiences with different types of music, sports, or talk shows. Their news coverage, with the exception of “all news” formats, may be only 1 to 2 minutes at the top of each hour. However, radio plays an important role in serving local interests.

This review highlights two important factors that relate to all news media formats and that are important to remember when working with the news media:

## 2.2. Frequency and Deadlines

The frequency with which a particular news medium is aired (hourly, daily, weekly, or even monthly) has a direct impact on the type of news that is communicated. It also has a practical bearing on the deadlines. Daily media have daily deadlines; for instance, a newspaper reporter must finish a story by the afternoon before it is printed in the next day’s edition. Therefore, if you want to contact a daily reporter about a potential story, it is best to call in the morning. To assist in coordinating stories with pressing deadlines, many newspapers and TV stations have editors who assign incoming stories to appropriate reporters. While it is usually best to talk with reporters who you know have an interest in your story, you may also contact assignment editors for specific events or if you are unsure of whom to contact.

## 2.3. Right Medium for the Right Story

The same story can appeal to different media outlets. It is all about targeting your outreach efforts to the right one. For instance, if you are participating in or hosting a women’s health fair, there are several angles you could develop for different media outlets:

- **Newspapers.** For the weekly community newspaper, list the event in the calendar section and try to get a reporter to attend and cover the event. However, remember that weekly newspapers often have limited staff and may not have a reporter solely devoted to covering health issues. Contact the newspaper well in advance to build the relationship and give them time to arrange for someone to cover the event. For the daily newspaper, it may be more difficult to get the fair covered. However, make sure to list the event in the calendar section. Approach the health reporter about a “bigger” story on local health events because the reporter will be more likely to write a round-up piece than to cover your fair only.
- **Television stations.** For on-the-scene coverage from TV stations, develop the relationship with the health editor (if there is one). If there is no health editor, contact the assignment editor a few days before the event to make sure the event gets on his or her calendar.
- **Radio stations.** Approach the public affairs directors of the station to see if they are interested in supporting the cause or if any of the station’s personalities are already champions of women’s issues. Other possibilities include arranging a live remote where

a DJ or personality broadcasts from the event itself, giving the DJ information on the event, and asking him to announce the fair as an upcoming community event.

There are times when it is not appropriate to contact all of the media outlets. For instance, you do not want to dilute the cause by contacting the TV stations every time something happens. Rather, invite the TV stations to events likely to draw a big crowd or that have a prominent speaker or great visuals that may appeal to their wide-ranging audience. Being effective is often about being selective.

## 2.4. Different Stories for Different “Beats”

Most news organizations, depending on their size, have a variety of different departments. These are usually divided into two basic categories, news and features. By definition, news is something “new and timely,” but it is also information of interest to a particular audience. By using the term “news” versus “features,” we distinguish between the type of news, such as breaking facts and important events versus human-interest stories. When watching the local news or reading the paper, think about how “harder” news is usually covered up front, followed by “softer” news features.

Within each area you may find a number of different “beats,” or areas of interest, that might apply to the folic acid campaign. For instance, a newspaper’s features department might include “beats” on both women’s interest and health news, each of which could potentially include a folic acid story. By tapping into these specific areas of interest, you can tailor your story in different ways. Many newspapers list their different departments, and some even provide contact names and numbers for different “beat” editors or reporters. In addition, most news desks at TV or radio stations can also refer you to appropriate personnel if you ask for someone working in the areas of “health news” or “women’s interest.”

## 2.5. Specialized Media

Studies have shown that minority women are even less aware of the benefits of folic acid than the overall population of women of childbearing age. Therefore, it becomes very important to understand the details of working with media targeting specific minority populations.

2.5.1. **Spanish-speakers** make up the second-largest minority group in the country and are the most at-risk minority population for NTDs. Television and radio are the preferred media in the Hispanic community; however, most communities do not have local TV programming so local efforts should focus on radio programming. There are currently more than 250 Spanish radio stations in the United States, reaching approximately 95% of the U.S. Spanish-speaking population. Although Hispanic persons read both Spanish- and English-language newspapers, they spend less than 1 hour a day reading newspapers.

- *Tips on working with Spanish-language media.* Whenever possible, create materials in Spanish and use Spanish-speaking spokespersons, celebrities,

and experts. Be sure that the person speaks the idiomatic Spanish of your primary target audience.

2.5.2. **African Americans** are the largest minority group in the United States. Radio is the most important medium for reaching this audience since African American adults spend 46% of their media time listening to radio (compared to 34% watching TV, 14% reading newspapers and 6% reading magazines). The top five format preferences of African Americans are Urban Contemporary, News/Talk, Religious, Adult Contemporary and Top 40. Despite the fact that African Americans report radio as their first source of news, African American newspapers are also an important part of any media relations effort in large metropolitan areas.

- *Tips on working with African American media:* Use African American spokespersons, celebrities, and experts whenever possible. Write news releases and other media materials in the style of the particular paper you are targeting (feature, hard news, anecdotal), realizing that many of these papers have few staff and may not be able to rewrite your materials.

## 2.6. Story Angles

Understanding the media is the first step to getting coverage. The second step is developing and selecting story angles or “news hooks” to attract attention and interest. Here are some examples:

- ***Most women don’t know to take folic acid before they are pregnant.*** This research-based finding presents a “hard news” opportunity to communicate the main message of your campaign. The press release included in this kit uses this angle. The most effective way to use the press release is to personalize it to your community, because media are more likely to cover things directly affecting their readers. Highlight specific facts relating to your state or community, or show how a partner organization is making a difference through specific programs.
- ***Community event focusing on folic acid.*** Promotional events, such as health fairs, awareness days, seminars, fundraising activities, and pregnancy planning workshops at clinics, can be promoted through the media. For television in particular, having a visual element for the story, something interesting to show on television, can help it get covered.

There are many other story topics you could use to help interest a specific news media, depending on your own organization’s priorities. Some of these might include:

- **Vitamins:** A story angle on the importance of taking a synthetic supplement in the form of a vitamin pill or a serving of fortified cereal.
- **Planning for Pregnancy: Before You Get Pregnant** – suggest an article on the topic of what you should know and do if you are planning a pregnancy, a broader story of interest to women’s pages.

- Seasonal stories: Tie in your issue to a specific holiday or time of year. For example, designate a “Moms-To-Be” Day after Mother’s Day or a winter story, since many babies are conceived during the long, cold winter months.
- Profile of a person or family affected by spina bifida or another NTD.

## 2.7. Materials for News Media

This kit contains some media materials that you can customize and use with your local media. They can be found in the appendices. Suggestions for local resources are also listed.

- The *press release* is a general news story that you can send to a variety of media contacts. Its basic story angle is that “most women do not know that folic acid must be taken before pregnancy in order to prevent birth defects.” Based on research findings, the release is very similar to the national news release that NCFE used during the first wave of the media campaign, but it also contains sections where you can insert relevant information for your local media. (Appendix B)
- A *media alert* is a useful format to promote a special event by highlighting the information most relevant to the media: in a nutshell, the who, what, when, where, and why of your event. Assignment and calendar section editors can use this news alert. For background purposes, a number of documents can be developed and customized that can both aid in the education of the media and provide necessary background information for the story. (Appendix B)
- A *backgrounder* on the national campaign gives a sense of the bigger picture of the national efforts to educate women about folic acid. (Appendix C)
- A *fact sheet* relates basic information on folic acid, pregnancy, and birth defects. (Appendix C)
- “*Frequently asked questions*” gives more information about folic acid and NTDs. (Appendix C)
- *Biographies* of any spokespersons you have participating in the campaign in your community are helpful to those making a choice of speakers.
- “*Real-life stories*” of families affected by NTDs give the campaign a reason for being. These families can also serve as spokespersons.



## 2.8. Your Media List

Once you have customized materials to your local area, it's time to get them into the hands of the reporters. Begin by compiling a list of specific reporters and editors who are most likely to be interested in your materials, depending on the specific angle you are using.

Your complete media list should include contacts from the following types of media outlets:

- Newspapers (dailies; weeklies; monthlies; college/university papers; papers targeted at specific audiences, including African-Americans, Hispanics, religious groups, and the health community)
- City, state, and regional magazines
- Local health care magazines or newsletters
- Newsletters of state or local health professional associations
- State or local bureaus of national wire services (Associated Press, Reuters, UPI)
- Local radio and TV stations
- Local cable TV stations
- Public broadcasting stations
- State or local bureaus of national TV and radio networks

You are much more likely to get a positive response if you send the information to a specific person, rather than sending it generically to “editor” or “producer” or “health reporter.” However, positions at media outlets change frequently, so if you find the name from the website or a directory, you should call to make sure the contact name you have is still current.

You can identify appropriate media contacts through several avenues, including:

- Media directories, which are available at libraries
- The publication itself
- Review past issues of the publication to see who covers which topics or to find a list of reporters and editors
- Search the publication's website
- Call the publication's main number and inquire who covers a specific topic

Make sure to keep track of what you learn, with whom you speak, and how they prefer to be contacted (via email, fax or mail). A sample tracking log can be found in Appendix E.

## 2.9. Distribution of Your Materials

Distributing your materials may seem simple, just a matter of drafting a short email, fax cover sheet, or note, and sending it. However, getting your materials to the reporter the right way can mean the difference between his seeing it or not. The most important part of getting your materials to the media is to make it easy for them to get the gist of your idea, cause, or event.

Make your communications brief and make sure to send it to the media in the way they request (email, fax, mail, or in person).

- **Email:** Paste the text of the press release, media alert or fact sheet to the body of the email. Do not use an attachment; reporters rarely open them because of computer viruses and slow computers. You can always offer to send an electronic copy as a follow-up. One way to make sure your email get to its intended recipient is to modify the delivery options on your email. Many programs allow you to you get a “return receipt” saying the email was delivered and/or opened.
- **Fax:** Make the cover sheet professional but as bold as possible since newsrooms get hundreds of faxes a day. You want them to notice yours!
- **Mail:** Be sure to clearly mark the envelope. If they see that it is from a recognized and credible source, they will be more likely to open your package rather than just put it aside. Also, keep in mind that mailrooms are still under tight scrutiny following the events of Fall 2001. If the reporter wants them, it is best to get original materials to the reporter in person instead of putting it in the mail. You can either deliver the package to him or send it to him via a courier. Whether delivering the materials in the mail or with a courier, remember that an eye-catching package with some promotional items might entice the reporter to look inside.
- **In Person:** Regular mail is often too slow for a deadline-crazed reporter. In such a situation, you can either deliver the materials in person or send them via courier. Keep in mind that even if you take the materials to the reporter, whether at a newspaper or TV station, you will likely leave the materials at the front desk. Be sure to clearly mark the package.

## 2.10. Follow-Up and Delivery of Your Pitch

Regardless of how you send your materials, the most critical factor in getting the media to run your story is personal follow-up, whether through a phone call, email, or a personal appointment. When you follow-up by telephone, you can determine that they have received your materials and also use the opportunity to encourage them to review the materials and run a story.

When calling, keep in mind that reporters have limited time and, generally, dislike getting calls from people asking if they have received email. To show that you respect their time and deadlines, always begin your conversation by asking, “Is this a good time for you?” They will appreciate this courtesy. If they are extremely pressed for time, politely set up a time that you can call back.

Here is a sample “pitch” script for you to modify and practice. Keep it short and to the point, and make sure to practice your pitch a few times before you call. Remember to have all important materials in front of you before making the call. For example, if you are going to invite a reporter to an event, have all of the pertinent information, such as time, location, and directions close at hand.

### ***Sample Pitch***

Hello, I am \_\_\_[name]\_\_\_ with \_\_\_[organization]\_\_\_. Is this a good time for you? *(wait for him to respond)* I am calling to share some information about the B vitamin folic acid that can be very important for your readers (or viewers or listeners). You may know that taking folic acid every day can help reduce birth defects. I frequently read (or watch or listen to) your column (or program), and I thought you might be interested in doing a story on.... *(Follow with your story angle, for instance, ...the fact that you have to take folic acid before you get pregnant).*

The objectives of the follow-up call are to get his attention and present your story angle and to use the call as a starting point for a discussion on the topic. If the reporter or editor says that he has not received the material, offer to resend it.

During the follow-up conversation, use common-sense telephone etiquette, but do explain the importance of the issue and the relevance of the story to the local public. Also, find out if he has any questions or needs more information. Ultimately, you are seeking to develop a relationship with the reporter or editor, one that will increase the likelihood that the story will be presented accurately and consistently to the public. You also want him to automatically call you for expert information should a story come up for which he needs information on folic acid and related birth defects. Having relationships with the media will also come in handy when you have news or events in the future.

If you have to prioritize your media list for follow-up, remember that daily newspapers are the leading news gathering force in a community. They tend to have more “specialized” editors and reporters and are naturally more likely to have the resources to cover your story. Also, radio and television contacts will often follow a newspaper’s lead in reporting news. So, if you get a story in the paper, it will help generate TV and radio interest. Following up first with editors and reporters at the daily local newspaper is a good start.

Whenever possible, arrange to meet face-to-face with reporters, editors, and producers; but, don’t be put off if they are not able to do so. If you do meet with them, bring the materials that you want them to use. If you are asking them to cover an event, provide written background information.

Using sample interview scripts found in Appendix D can help you prepare for possible questions and responses.

Finally, if a story does appear, don't forget to send a short note of thanks. Remember, you are trying to build long-term relationships with reporters, not just get one story.



## 3. Preparation for the Interview

### 3.1. Interviews and Spokespersons

Personal follow-up also gives you the opportunity to establish yourself and your organization as reliable sources of information. If you can serve as a spokesperson on the issue, be sure to offer yourself as an expert on specific topics (folic acid, pregnancy, birth defects) who can be called on in the future. If you are not a recognized expert, you may want to identify a local spokesperson for the campaign before following up to offer an interview with that person. Be sure to include the spokesperson's credentials in the materials that you send.

Having a spokesperson will help you maximize your publicity coverage. Talk shows, call-in shows, and public affairs programs all provide publicity opportunities, often in the form of interviews. Newspaper reporters and editors often want a local spokesperson that they can directly quote in their stories. TV reporters and radio DJs also like having a spokesperson on hand to talk about events and provide "sound bites" explaining what is happening and why.

Print and broadcast interviews obviously differ in many ways, but the following advice generally applies to arranging, preparing for, and giving interviews:

- **Arranging an interview.** Make sure to ask about the interviewer's objective and the context of the program. This will set the stage for the person being interviewed and help her prepare. Feel free to ask the interviewer for his questions in advance. He may not stick solely to these questions, but it can help the person being interviewed prepare appropriate answers and think about the kinds of questions that may be asked.
- **Prepare thoroughly for an interview.** Organize your information, and write important talking points (outlined below) on note cards if necessary. Although the interviewer will have questions, keeping these important points in mind will help you get them across in your answers. In a broadcast situation where the interview may be live, one way to do this is to begin with: "I want to say that..." or "It's important that..."
- **Speak in simple, direct, and easy to understand statements.** Incorporate your key messages into words that the vast consumer audience will understand.

## **3.2. Key Talking Points**

When conducting the interview, try to incorporate the following talking points, as appropriate:

- Folic acid is important for every woman who could possibly become pregnant.
- Women who are thinking about becoming pregnant need to get 400 micrograms of folic acid every day beginning at least a month before they get pregnant.
- Since most women don't know exactly when they will become pregnant, it's important to get enough folic acid every day just in case.
- Getting enough folic acid daily can prevent up to 70 percent of some types of serious birth defects that affect a baby's brain or spine.
- A person can get folic acid through some enriched foods like breads, pasta, rice, and cereals, but an easy way is through a vitamin pill.
- This issue is so important that a national coalition of almost fifty organizations have joined together to get these messages out to women.

You may also find the media Q & A document in Appendix D helpful when preparing for interviews. The Q & A lists potential media questions and suggested responses.

## **3.3. Tips for Success**

Broadcast interviews, especially on television, involve additional considerations. These mostly apply to how you will look on television. The key thing to remember is that you don't want anything to distract from your message. To make the most of a television appearance, keep the following suggestions in mind:

### **3.3.1. Body Language and Gestures**

- Resist the temptation to bend into the microphone; sit or stand up straight.
- Don't fold your arms.
- If sitting, pull your jacket snugly under you so that you don't slouch, cross your legs at the knee or ankle; and don't swivel in your seat. If standing, plant your weight solidly on one foot to avoid swaying from side to side. Avoid shifting your clothes, which can make a horrible noise on the microphone.
- Keep your eyes on the interviewer. Do not look at the camera or studio monitor. If possible, turn your whole head to the interviewer, not just your eyes.

- Use natural gestures, but avoid rapid hand movements that are difficult for the camera to follow.
- Never assume that you are off camera just because someone else is talking; you may still be in range of video and audio.

### **3.3.2. Clothes and Makeup**

- Avoid clothes with checks, stripes, dots, florals, and patterns, all of which have a tendency to “dance” on camera. Medium-tone gray, blue, brown, or mixed colors are preferable.
- Avoid solid white blouses and shirts. Gray or light blue shades give the best effect.
- Avoid flashy accessories and jewelry that will catch the light. Don’t wear cuff links or tie tacks, which can also catch a glare.
- If possible, avoid wearing glasses if you can see the interviewer without squinting. Don’t wear glasses that turn dark in sunlight because they will darken under the strong TV lights. Also keep in mind that contact lenses can easily dry out in the hot lights as well; keep eye drops handy.
- Women: Wear understated makeup. Avoid bright lipstick and frosted or glittery eye shadow. If your hands will be in camera range, get a manicure, but avoid bright nail polish.
- Men: Allow the TV station’s makeup artist to apply translucent powder before the interview. No one will know you are wearing makeup, and it will greatly help reduce shine under the hot lights, especially if you perspire. Also, try to shave as closely as possible before going on camera. If the interview is late in the day, bring an electric razor and shave just before the interview.





## **4. A Guide to Placing Public Service Materials**

Public service materials are the central message platforms of communicating with the public in many social marketing campaigns. Paired with news media coverage, the use of public service materials ensures that the right messages reach the target audience. That's because public service announcements (PSAs), the spots prepared for television or radio broadcast, are used by the media "as is" and, if developed properly, are highly relevant and motivating to the target audience.

There has been debate recently about the effectiveness of public service announcements. At issue is the limited availability of "true" public service time, i.e. the free airing or printing of PSAs in the broadcast and print media. Some broadcast stations fulfill a public duty to run public service information for a percentage of their on-air time, but the form that those public service announcements take may vary. Moreover, newspapers and other print media are not required to run public service announcements, although many see it in their interest to carry out a range of community service activities. Remember that media outlets are businesses that must make money to survive, and the way they do that is by selling advertising, which inevitably use the most desirable air times. As a result, many in the public health communications field have negotiated promotional relationships as a way to guarantee that PSAs are given more desirable positioning in the media.

While the status of public service continues to change, the best approach to placing PSAs, in the absence of funding for advertising space, is to make a local media contact. Each local TV station, radio station, and newspaper makes its own commitment to public service and is approachable based on that commitment. Many of the networks and major media have the resources to produce their own public service materials, however, many local media do not. These local media may have public service directors who decide whether or not to run PSAs, and when and where to place them. Because they look to local organizations for ideas and support, your input will be essential.

Much of the advice on working with the news media also applies to working with public service directors. The main difference is that, instead of asking the media to write a story using your story angle and materials, you are pitching a "pre-packaged" message in a format similar to an advertisement.

### **4.1. Public Service Announcement Materials**

NCFA has designed a range of public service materials for local placement and use. These will also be used nationally, as appropriate. For example, NCFA will approach women's magazines to place the print PSA and will also arrange a satellite feed of the TV PSA to all TV stations through the National Association of Broadcasters. However, your help in distributing the materials and following up with local media is essential in making sure the PSAs are used properly.

The PSAs were developed with target audience input to ensure that they would communicate messages in a way that is relevant, compelling, and effective. After all, the goal of social marketing is behavior change.

CDC has produced the following materials that you can customize to use in your placement efforts:

<b>Angels Don't Walk</b>	<b>Before You Know It</b>	<b>Ready Or Not</b>
A touching country music song and video about a little girl with spina bifida who wanted to walk.	For women who are thinking about becoming pregnant soon (contemplators). Available in English and Spanish.	For women not considering pregnancy now or in the near future (non-contemplators).
Video PSA Audio PSA	Video PSA Audio PSA Print Ad	Video PSA Audio PSA Print Ad

You can request copies of these materials at <http://www2.cdc.gov/ncbddd/faorder/>.

## **4.2. Public Service Announcement (PSAs) Placement**

To increase the probability of the PSA being used by local media, you should be aware of the following elements:

- The ads are of high quality and have been professionally produced.
- The ads have a clear call to action for the consumer audience and provide a phone number or event date.
- The ads may provide local information or a local place to go.
- A toll-free number to CDC's information line on folic acid is included in the PSAs so that the audience can get more information. The National Alliance for Hispanic Health will staff a toll-free number for Spanish-speaking PSA viewers.

Step by step:

1. Identify public service directors of local media and compile your contact list.
2. Distribute materials by sending the PSA and pitch letter.
3. Follow up with the contact person. Call the public service director to make sure the PSA and pitch letter were received.

If it seems that your PSA is not a high priority to the public service director, consider asking for an appointment to discuss why it is crucial to inform people about folic acid and why this specific message is important now. Some additional points to make include:

- Emphasize the value and importance of the campaign to the station's audience, and make suggestions about when the PSA should be placed based on the timing of campaign events in your area.
- Explain that the station's efforts on your behalf will be recognized and appreciated by public health officials and community leaders, in addition to women of reproductive age.
- Also point out the broad coalition of organizations involved in this campaign.

### **4.3. Media Partnerships and Approaches**

Up to this point, this kit has provided information on working with the news media and placing public service announcements as separate activities. The following are some suggestions for integrating the two.

- **Coordinating public service announcements with news events.** One strategy to combine the two is to get the station's news department interested in publicizing campaign events before speaking with the public service director. This will give you increased leverage when asking for placement of the PSA.
- **Co-sponsorship with the media.** Media outlets may be willing to do more than provide publicity or run public service announcements. Invite a television or radio station, local cable network, or area newspaper to co-sponsor your campaign or event. While a media outlet may want a certain degree of exclusivity in return for their promotional efforts, co-sponsorship can be a worthwhile endeavor if the outlet is very effective in reaching your target audience.

# Appendix A: Pitches

## A.1. PSA Pitch Letters

### A.1.a. Local News Media Pitch Letter

*Note: You can adapt this sample “pitch” letter to inform local news media about your program or event, by using it as a cover letter for a press release, or with more information about other related activities in your area.*

[Date]

[Reporter/Editor Name]

Publication (media name)

[Address]

Dear [Name]:

Although a growing number of women now know that taking the B vitamin folic acid can help reduce the risk of having a baby with birth defects of the brain and spine, most do not know that it must be taken **before** pregnancy to be effective. The unfortunate fact is that if a woman doesn’t start taking folic acid until she is pregnant, it may be too late.

[Local organization], as part of the National Council on Folic Acid, is conducting a campaign to spread this key message. The amount of folic acid in most multivitamins (0.4 milligrams or 400 micrograms) must be taken every day for at least one month before conception in order to have a full preventive effect. It is important that women understand why they should start taking folic acid now, before they get pregnant. Currently, less than a quarter of women get this necessary daily amount.

A news piece addressing this important issue would help educate women about the need to make folic acid a part of their daily routine, whether or not they are planning a pregnancy. With [number] unplanned pregnancies, or [about half] of all pregnancies, in [state], folic acid is something that all women of childbearing age should be aware of.

[Sample copy to promote local event:] To highlight this information, [name of organization] will be sponsoring a “Before You’re Pregnant” women’s health fair from [start time to end time] on [date] at [location] to encourage all women to start taking folic acid now.

Enclosed please find press materials [attach news release, fact sheet, other materials as appropriate] on folic acid and birth defects. I will follow-up with you to answer any questions you may have or provide additional information. In the meantime, please do not hesitate to call me at [phone number], or email me at... I will also be able to put you in touch with local experts who can provide supportive information and interviews.

Sincerely,

[Name]

[Title]

[Organization]

Enclosures

## A.1.b. Public Service Directors

*Note: You can customize this letter to public service directors and send it with copies of the public service announcements (PSAs).*

[Date]

[Public Service Director Name]

[Address]

Dear [Name]:

Even before a woman knows she is pregnant, it may be too late to prevent some common birth defects. Each year, an estimated 4,000 pregnancies in the United States are affected with birth defects of the spine and brain – that’s more than the number of infants born with HIV or congenital rubella syndrome. The common thread among these conditions is that they are all largely preventable.

To reduce their risk of a pregnancy affected by these birth defects, all women need to take 0.4 milligrams (400 micrograms) of the B vitamin folic acid every day. Here’s the critical part: To be most effective, they need to do this **before** they get pregnant. These birth defects develop early during pregnancy, before most women know they are pregnant. Unless a woman is taking the daily recommended amount at least a month before conception, she may not have sufficient amounts in her body during the important stages of fetal development.

Getting this amount of folic acid is an easy thing to do. A simple way that women can ensure that they are getting enough is to take a daily vitamin or eat a serving of breakfast cereal fortified with 100 percent of the recommended daily value (DV), in addition to eating a healthy diet.

This campaign is part of an ongoing effort by the National Council on Folic Acid (NCFA), a coalition of close to 50 organizations, to reduce the number of birth defects by promoting folic acid. Very few women are aware that folic acid can help prevent birth defects, and even less are aware that it must be taken before pregnancy. Here in [location/state], we are working with [list partners] on a variety of community and media outreach activities [you can customize/describe briefly]. You can help reach the thousands of local women of childbearing age who may not be aware of this important information. Please [air/print] the enclosed PSA as often as possible so your [viewers/listeners/readers] can become aware of the risks and start taking folic acid every day from now on. If more women start doing this, we can greatly reduce the number of these severe birth defects.

[For radio: I will follow-up with you shortly by email to confirm when your station will air this PSA, so we can effectively track when and where it is being used.] If you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to contact me at [###-####]. Your assistance is important and appreciated.

Sincerely,

[Name]

[Title]

[Organization]

Enclosures

## A.2. Pitch Scripts

### A.2.a. Pitch Script to Public Service Directors

Let's say that you call a television or radio public service director to encourage her to use the PSA. She says the station is already running their quota of PSAs right now. Your challenge is to convince her that there is room for one more PSA. You also want to promote a local health fair for women that your organization is hosting.

After introducing yourself, you say:

We sent you a tape and background information for a PSA encouraging women to take folic acid every day before they get pregnant in order to prevent birth defects. Have you had a chance to review it?

**No, but we're already running our quota of PSAs right now. We don't have much available time for PSAs, and I have a lot of tapes already stacked on my desk, so I don't know when we might get to it, if at all.**

I understand there's a great demand for public service from a lot of worthwhile causes, but if you have some time, I'd like to tell you a little bit about what we're doing and why it is an important message at this time. Our campaign is about women's health and the health of children. The main message is that women need to take folic acid every day **before** they get pregnant to prevent some common, serious birth defects.

**I think we already ran something about folic acid and birth defects last year.**

I appreciate that, thank you. This new campaign is part of an ongoing effort by the National Council on Folic Acid to prevent birth defects. This particular spot highlights the fact that folic acid must be taken every day even before a woman gets pregnant. Not only are most women not getting enough folic acid every day, but even more of them are not aware that you need to be taking it up to a month **before** conception to be effective. That's a very specific message that's absolutely vital. Unfortunately, if a woman waits until she knows she is pregnant it may be too late.

**Why is that?**

The birth defects that folic acid helps prevent happen very early during pregnancy – before most women know they are pregnant. Because it takes time for a woman's body to build up sufficient stores of folic acid, women need to be taking it every day for at least a month before conception.

**Still, that's a fairly narrow audience— women who are planning to get pregnant. We prefer materials that serve the general public.**

Actually, this message applies more broadly. Because over half of all pregnancies in the United States are unplanned, it is important that all women who might get pregnant be aware of this information, which is approximately [have number of women 15-45 in your state/area ready to cite here]. If all these women took folic acid every day, we could greatly reduce the number of these birth defects, which is our ultimate goal.

**How many children are born with these defects?**

They affect about 4,000 pregnancies each year. Approximately 1 of every 1,000 infants born in the United States has one of the two main defects we are talking about – spina bifida and anencephaly. Spina bifida is the most common disabling birth defect and the leading cause of childhood paralysis. Babies with anencephaly die either before or during childbirth, or live just a few days.

**What does the spot look like/sound like?**

It's a professionally produced spot that's very appealing, emotional, and motivating. It was extensively field-tested with women in the target audience. The spot gives information on how to get enough folic acid every day.

Also, we are backing up the PSA campaign with lots of local activities, such as [describe community-based activities]. I will also be contacting the news media with recent research and information – and it would be ideal if you could link the PSA with local news about what we're doing in [state/town].

**I'll see if I can find the package and look at/listen to the tape.**

Thanks. Running this spot could help prevent birth defects in children, and it is critical information for your female audience. The package was sent to you [when], is [describe distinguishing characteristics of package if any] and has [organization's] name on the return address. I'll call back in a few days to make sure you've found it and see what you've decided.

[Then follow up again in a few days.]

**A.2.b. Voicemail**

You call a television assignment editor to suggest that the station do a story about the need for women to take folic acid before they get pregnant. If you get their voice mail, you will only have about 30 seconds to convince them to consider a story.

Here are some different approaches:

**New Campaign:** Hello, this is [name] from [organization]. My number is [###-####]. We recently sent you some information about a new campaign on the use of folic acid to prevent birth defects. You may have heard that this B vitamin can help prevent birth defects, but like most people, you may not be aware that women must take it every day before getting pregnant for it to be effective. A story on this important fact could help reduce some serious birth defects. We have a number of experts lined up and could provide good visuals for the story (such as at a doctor's office, hospital nursery, or at a health fair). Please call me at [###-####] for more information or for an interview.

**Preventable Birth Defects:** Hello, this is [name] from [organization]. My number is [###-####]. Over 4,000 pregnancies this year will be affected by a birth defect of the brain or spine. Yet these common, serious birth defects are largely preventable – if only more women took folic acid every day before they got pregnant. What most women don't know is that if they wait until they get pregnant to start taking folic acid, it may be too late. We're conducting a



local campaign on this, and would like to talk with you about doing a story on this important new information. Please call me at [###-####]. I can send you more background information, put you in touch with our experts, and give you ideas for story visuals.

**Timely Hook/Pre-pregnancy Health:** Hello, this is [name] from [organization]. My number is [###-####]. I'm calling to interest you in doing a story on healthy babies that ties in to a local campaign we're doing right now. There's a lot of talk about prenatal advice, but what women do even before they get pregnant can be just as important. In order to prevent birth defects, for instance, women should be taking folic acid every day at least one month before conception. Our research shows most women don't know this. Please call me at [###-####]. I can provide you with pre-pregnancy planning information and experts for a timely story that would be of great interest to all women. (This approach could also be tailored for different events throughout the year, or for seasons. For example, for Mother's Day, you might want to use an angle such as: "You might not think of yourself as a mother – but maybe you should.")

## Appendix B: Press Release and Media Alerts

### B.1. Local News Media Press Release

*Note: This sample general press release will help increase folic acid awareness and promote NCFA's efforts to educate women about taking folic acid to prevent birth defects. Customize this release with local information to make it more relevant to local reporters, and send it to your local news media.*

For Immediate Release  
[Date]

Contact: [Your Name]  
[Organization]  
[Telephone Number]

#### **[Your Organization Name] Urges Women To Take Folic Acid Before Pregnancy**

[Your Town, Your State] – In the fight to prevent birth defects, sometimes “When?” is just as important as “How Much?” While a growing number of women are aware that taking the B vitamin folic acid can reduce their risk of having a baby with certain birth defects of the brain and spine, many are still unaware that it must be taken **before** pregnancy to be effective.

According to the National Council on Folic Acid (NCFA), a partnership of national and state organizations dedicated to reducing birth defects by promoting the daily use of folic acid, less than one in ten women know that folic acid should be taken before conception. This important finding forms the basis of NCFA's educational campaign, which [your organization name] is conducting in [state/local area] this year.

“Even though we have known for nearly a decade that folic acid can help prevent certain birth defects of the brain and spine, less than a quarter of women are getting enough,” said [spokesperson name and title, if applicable]. “Our goal is to get more women to take the recommended daily amount of folic acid now – because if you wait until you are pregnant, it may be too late.”

Achieving this goal is complicated by the fact that nearly half of all pregnancies in the United States are unplanned. In [state], of the over [number] pregnancies each year, [number] or [percentage] are unplanned. Because of this, the recommendation is that all women of childbearing age should take folic acid every day, whether or not they are actively planning a pregnancy.

The critical time when folic acid is needed is in the very first stage of pregnancy, when the cells are dividing and the fetus is beginning to form. In order to have sufficient folic acid in the body at this time, it is necessary for a woman to be taking 0.4 milligrams (400 micrograms) daily. This is the amount that is in most multivitamins, and it must be taken **before** pregnancy to be effective. If taken by all women every day **before** conception and throughout the early stages of pregnancy, folic acid is estimated to reduce the incidence of neural tube defects by up to 70 percent.

Neural tube defects (NTDs) affect an estimated 4,000 pregnancies each year. The most common NTD, spina bifida, is the leading cause of childhood paralysis. Anencephaly, an NTD that affects the brain, results in miscarriage, stillbirth, or babies who live only a few days.

In addition to taking a multivitamin every day, experts also advise women to eat a balanced diet with foods rich in folate, such as leafy green vegetables, orange juice, and beans. Many breakfast cereals are fortified with folic acid, as are “enriched” breads and pastas. However, although it is possible to get enough folic acid by modifying and carefully planning one’s diet, experts caution that it is difficult to maintain the daily requirement without supplementing your diet with a vitamin containing folic acid or a serving of breakfast cereal fortified with 100 percent of the recommended daily value (DV).

[Note: you can add your organization’s “boiler plate”, a short paragraph highlighting your mission and target audience, here.]

The National Council on Folic Acid (NCFA) is a coalition of organizations including governmental agencies, non-profit organizations, health professionals and community health groups who share a common interest in reducing birth defects. NCFA aims to increase folic acid awareness and education among women and health care services for women, and to increase the level and availability of folic acid in food. Its ultimate goal is to eliminate preventable neural tube defects through the use of folic acid.

###

## B.2. Local Event Promotion Media Alert

*Note: You can adapt this sample media alert, to fit your specific program or event. Try to keep the alert to just one page.*

For Immediate Release  
[Date]

Contact: [Your Name]  
[Organization]  
[Telephone Number]

### **“Before You’re Pregnant” Women’s Health Fair Set for [Date]**

#### Media Alert

**What:** “Before You’re Pregnant” Women’s Health Fair  
This event will feature free information, displays, booths, and activities for all women, showcasing pre-pregnancy advice.  
Special events will include a seminar with local expert [name] and a class on pre-pregnancy diet and exercise.

**Who:** Sponsored by [organization], with [supporting and contributing partners]

**When:** [Start time] to [Finish time] and Date

**Where:** [Location]  
[Include directions if necessary]

**Why:** To help women navigate the maze of pre-pregnancy advice while encouraging them to think ahead about what they can do to ensure a healthy pregnancy and baby. What women do, or don’t do, before getting pregnant can directly affect the baby. For instance, many women know that taking folic acid every day can prevent certain birth defects but few realize that it must be taken before conception to be effective.

**Media Opportunity:** Photography: Governor/Mayor elect/spouse will be on hand to open the day and meet participants.  
Interviews: [expert names and affiliations] will be available [when] for interviews.

###



# Appendix C: Background Materials

## C.1. Folic Acid Fact Sheet

*Note: Consider adding any local statistics on NTD rates or levels of folic acid awareness or consumption.*

### **Q. What is folic acid and why is it so important?**

A. Folic acid is a B vitamin that can be found in some enriched foods and in most multivitamin pills. Folic acid has been proven to reduce the risk of neural tube defect (NTD)-affected pregnancies when taken as a vitamin supplement one month before conception and throughout the first trimester. Folic acid is necessary for proper cell growth and development of the embryo. Although it is not known exactly how folic acid works to prevent NTDs, its role in tissue formation is essential. Folic acid is required for the production of DNA, necessary for the rapid cell growth needed to make fetal tissues and organs (such as the baby's brain and spine) in early pregnancy. **That is why it is important for a woman to have enough folic acid in her body both before and during pregnancy.** Getting enough only takes a small effort, but it makes a big difference.

### **Q. What serious birth defects can folic acid prevent?**

A. Folic acid prevents NTDs, such as spina bifida and anencephaly. *Spina bifida*, a birth defect of the spine, is a condition that often has disabling consequences. With spina bifida, a person's legs may be paralyzed, and there are often problems with bowel and bladder control. Learning disabilities are common in children with spina bifida, and mental retardation sometimes occurs. *Anencephaly*, another type of NTD, affects the brain. All babies with *anencephaly* die before or shortly after birth.

### **Q. When do women need to start taking folic acid?**

A. The U.S. Public Health Service recommends that **all women of childbearing age should consume 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid daily**. Women need to have folic acid in their system a month before getting pregnant and throughout the first few weeks of pregnancy. No one expects an unplanned pregnancy, but it happens every day. In fact, about half of all pregnancies in the United States are not planned. ***That's why all women should get enough folic acid every day if there's any chance of getting pregnant.*** Even if a woman is not planning a baby until next month, next year or later, she should take folic acid because by the time she knows she's pregnant, the baby's brain and spine are already formed.

### **Q. Where can I get folic acid?**

A. Take a vitamin...For many women, an easy way to be to get enough folic acid is to take a vitamin with folic acid in it. Most multivitamins contain 400 micrograms (0.4 milligrams) of folic acid. Vitamins containing folic acid can be bought at groceries, pharmacies, or discount stores that sell vitamins. If multivitamins cause an upset stomach, women may want to try taking them with food or just before going to bed. Vitamins containing only folic acid are also available, and they are smaller and easier to swallow.

And eat right... Most of us get some folic acid in our diets every day. Folic acid has been added to some foods. Foods made from "enriched" flour or grain products now contain additional folic acid; examples are bread, pasta, rice, and cereals. Many breakfast cereals

contain 100 percent (400 micrograms per serving) of the folic acid needed, while others contain 100 micrograms per serving. A well-balanced diet with fruits and vegetables is always important. Foods rich in folate are green leafy vegetables, orange juice from concentrate, liver, and other foods. It is possible to get 400 micrograms folic acid through food alone, but it takes careful planning to make sure you get enough every day.

**Q. Can women get too much folic acid?**

A. Folic acid has no known toxic level. If a woman of childbearing age was to eat a bowl of fully fortified cereal (100-400 micrograms), take 400 micrograms (0.4 milligrams) folic acid supplement, and eat foods rich in folate, she would not have any problems caused by too much folic acid. Even in very high amounts, folic acid is non-toxic. Nevertheless, it is recommended that women consume no more than 1,000 micrograms of synthetic folic acid a day.

**Q. Are women getting enough folic acid?**

A. Even though there are several ways to get 400 micrograms (0.4 milligrams) of folic acid every day, two thirds of women in the United States do not consume adequate amounts of folic acid.

**Q. Who is at risk of having a baby with neural tube defect in the United States?**

A. Each year in the United States, almost 4,000 babies are paralyzed or die from serious birth defects of the spine (spina bifida) or brain (anencephaly). Approximately 70% of these cases could be prevented if the mother consumed sufficient folic **before** and during the early weeks of pregnancy.

There are sixty million women of childbearing age in the United States. All women who could become pregnant are at risk of having an NTD-affected pregnancy. It is not possible to predict which women will have NTD-affected pregnancies. Ninety-five percent of NTDs occur in women who have no personal or family history of NTDs. However, some risk factors are known:

- Having had an NTD-affected pregnancy increases a woman's chance to have another NTD-affected pregnancy approximately twenty times. These women should take 4,000 micrograms (4 milligrams) of folic acid daily. That is ten times the usual recommended amount.
- Maternal insulin-dependent diabetes
- Anti-seizure medication use
- Medically diagnosed obesity
- Exposure to high temperatures in early pregnancy, such as prolonged fevers or hot tub use

- Race and ethnicity (NTDs are more common among white women than black women and more common among Hispanic women than non-Hispanic women)
- Lower socio-economic status

**Q. What are the costs associated with NTDs?**

A. The average total lifetime cost to society for each infant born with spina bifida is approximately \$532,000 per child. This estimate is only an average. For many children, the total cost may be well above \$1,000,000.

**Q. Where can I find more information about folic acid?**

A. For more information on folic acid, or if you have any questions, contact us at 1-888-232-5929. You can also visit our Web site at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/folicacid>.



## C.2. Campaign Backgrounder \_ 1 page

*Note: This sample general campaign backgrounder will help increase folic acid awareness and promote NCFAs efforts to educate women about taking folic acid to prevent birth defects. Customize the backgrounder with local information to make it more relevant to local reporters, and then send it to local news media.*

### National Folic Acid Campaign

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the March of Dimes, the National Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Coalition (HMHB), and the National Council on Folic Acid have organized the National Folic Acid Campaign to promote the use of folic acid to prevent the serious birth defects spina bifida and anencephaly. The goal of the campaign is to educate all women who could possibly become pregnant to consume 400 micrograms (0.4 milligrams) of synthetic folic acid daily from vitamin supplements and/or fortified foods in addition to eating a healthy diet.

Beginning in [Date], the [Your Organization], in conjunction with the National Folic Acid Campaign, is launching a campaign in [Your City] to educate women of childbearing age about the importance of consuming folic acid. The goal is to work with the community to help inform these women about the importance of taking folic acid **before** conception and during the first few months of pregnancy. Research has shown that, as a group, women ages 18-35 who are not currently thinking about pregnancy are more resistant to behavior changes that could prevent birth defects than women ages 18-35 who are actively planning a pregnancy. In addition, more than half of all pregnancies each year in this country are unplanned. The biggest barriers to reaching women who are not thinking about pregnancy appears to be misinformation and lack of knowledge about folic acid. They do not know that they need to take folic acid before pregnancy for it to be effective in preventing birth defects. They are also less likely to be taking vitamin supplements in general. We need to reach them with this important message—be prepared!

For the campaign's goals and message to have a lasting impact, [Your Organization], CDC, and HMHB are working with community-based organizations and health systems in our city to reach these women with this important message. Input from these partners will guide an integrated effort designed to reach these women where they live, shop and play. Television and radio spots promoting folic acid use will run on popular stations starting in [Time Period]. Partners may be asked to join us in outreach activities at community festivals, health fairs, and radio remotes at [General Locations]. Health care and social service professionals will have the opportunity to participate in education sessions, to learn how to develop their own folic acid outreach programs, and to receive resources and materials to help them counsel their clients effectively. Finally, coalition members will be involved in media relations efforts, including appearances on local television and radio programs as well as interviews for local publications.

If you would like more information about the National Folic Acid Campaign and the [Name of your city] project, contact [Your Name] at [Phone] or [Email].

### C.3. Campaign Backgrounder\_ 4 page

*Note: Customize and attach this fact sheet to the PSA Pitch letter and send both with the PSA. This will give the public service director additional background information on the scope and importance of the campaign in a succinct format.*

[Date]

Contact: [Your Name]  
[Organization]  
[Telephone Number]

#### **Fact Sheet:**

#### **National Council on Folic Acid Campaign**

##### Background

- In the early 1990's, conclusive research showed that daily intake of the B vitamin folic acid could help reduce certain birth defects of the spine and brain by as much as 70 percent.
- These birth defects, called neural tube defects (NTDs) are common and severe. Spina bifida, which affects the spine, is the most common disabling birth defect and the leading cause of childhood paralysis. Anencephaly is a condition that affects the brain and is always fatal.

##### Early Actions

- In 1992, the U.S. Public Health Service issued guidelines recommending that all women capable of becoming pregnant should consume 0.4 milligrams (400 micrograms) of folic acid per day, to reduce their risk of having a pregnancy affected with spina bifida or other NTDs.
- The FDA began a food fortification program that required folic acid to be added to "enriched" flour, breads, and other grains. Many staple food products, such as cereals, breads, flours, cornmeal, rice, noodles, and pasta, are now fortified with folic acid. However, food fortification alone is unlikely to provide the average diet with sufficient amounts of folic acid.
- Efforts to educate women about folic acid and preventing birth defects were also carried out by a number of individual organizations. These include state-based public health campaigns and national efforts by non-profit organizations, such as the March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation.

- The March of Dimes also began a biannual Gallup poll of women's knowledge and behavior on issues related to health pregnancy, including folic acid. Information about this survey can be obtained from the March of Dimes by calling 1-888-MODIMES (663-4637).

### Current Situation

- While awareness of folic acid has grown (from 52 percent of women in 1995 to 75 percent in 2000), knowledge about the link between folic acid and preventing birth defects is still limited. As recently as 2000, only 14 percent of women knew that folic acid helps prevent birth defects.
- More importantly, few women are getting the necessary daily amount required to prevent birth defects. Only 34 percent of women between the ages of 18 and 45 years who are currently not pregnant take a daily vitamin containing folic acid. The percentage drops to 19 percent for women 18-24 years of age, yet this age group accounts for 32 percent of all women giving birth in the United States.
- To address this problem, a number of organizations with a common interest in reducing birth defects, formed the National Council on Folic Acid in 1997 under the leadership of the March of Dimes and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Current NCFA members are listed at the end of this fact sheet.
- In addition, Congress passed a new Birth Defects Prevention Act in March 1998. This bipartisan legislation established the first nationwide network of state and regional programs for birth defects research and prevention. It assures continued funding for birth defects surveillance and research and commits to new funding for prevention and education programs.

### NCFA Goals and Activities

The National Council on Folic Acid promotes the consumption of folic acid among consumer and professional audiences. The Council shares information and develops collaborative programs among the members, establishes consistent messages, prevents duplication of efforts, and develops new ideas for folic acid education.

Some of NCFA's recent activities include:

- March of Dimes launched a multi-year public health education campaign on folic acid in October 1998. The organization pledged to give \$10 million over 3 years to folic acid efforts aimed at reducing the incidence of NTDs in the United States by 30 percent by the year 2001. Many local March of Dimes chapters established councils to conduct educational and community activities in their areas. The campaign recently included a popular series of PSAs featuring a stork that was looking for women of childbearing age. In the PSA, some women want the stork to visit, others want to hide from the

stork, and still others are caught by surprise when the stork visits. The stork series emphasizes the message that all women who are capable of becoming pregnant should take folic acid daily.

- CDC developed national public health campaign materials on folic acid, available in both English and Spanish. The materials include PSAs and health education materials for states and local NCFA members. “Before You Know It” materials were designed to reach contemplators with the message to take folic acid before pregnancy. “Ready/Not” materials target pregnancy non-contemplators with the message that their bodies are ready to have a baby even if they are not, and that it is important to be prepared by taking folic acid daily. CDC also provides help for state and local campaigns that want to evaluate their efforts.
- The Spina Bifida Association of America (SBAA) has filed a citizen’s petition with the FDA asking the agency to increase its level of required fortification of enriched cereal grains.
- The Association of Women’s Health, Obstetric, and Neonatal Nurses (AWHONN) is actively involved in providing information on folic acid as part of routine pre-conception counseling to its members.
- American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG), Association of Women’s Health, Obstetrics, and Neonatal Nurses (AWHONN), American College of Physicians - American Society of Internal Medicine (ACP-ASIM), and the National Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Coalition (HMHB) have been sending educational mailings to their members using grant money from the March of Dimes.

Members of the National Council on Folic Acid:

Alliance of Genetic Support Groups  
American Academy of Family Physicians  
American Academy of Pediatrics  
American Academy of Physician Assistants  
American Association of Health Plans  
American College of Medical Genetics  
American College of Nurse Practitioners  
American College of Nurse-Midwives  
American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists  
American College of Physicians – American Society of Internal Medicine  
American College of Preventive Medicine  
American Dietetic Association  
American Medical Association  
American Medical Student Association  
American Medical Women’s Association  
American Pharmaceutical Association  
American Society for Reproductive Medicine  
The Arc of the United States  
Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs  
Association of Reproductive Health Professionals  
Association of State and Territorial Health Office  
Association of State and Territorial Public Health Nutrition Directors  
Association of Women’s Health, Obstetric, and Neonatal Nurses  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
Council for Responsible Nutrition  
Health Resources and Services Administration  
March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation  
National Alliance for Hispanic Health  
National Association of Hispanic Nurses  
National Association of Neonatal Nurses  
National Association of Nurse Practitioners in Women’s Health  
National Association of Pediatric Nurse Associates & Practitioners  
National Association of School Nurses, Inc.  
National Association of WIC Directors  
National Birth Defects Prevention Network  
National Black Nurses Association  
National Council on La Raza  
National Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Coalition  
National Perinatal Association  
National Society of Genetic Counselors  
Pan American Health Organization  
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation  
Shriners Hospitals for Children  
Spina Bifida Association of America  
The Teratology Society  
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill  
USA Dry Pea & Lentil Council  
Wheat Foods Council

# Appendix D: Interview Preparation

## D.1. Sample Interview Scripts

These scripts are for your information and to help you prepare for possible questions and responses. They are not meant to be sent to the media. Reporters' comments are in bold, yours are in normal type.

### D.1.a. Television Interview

A reporter at one of your local television stations comes to your office to tape an interview for her weekly health feature. Use your interviewing skills to communicate the key messages in succinct "sound bites."

**Tell me about the current campaign you are conducting.**

[Name of your organization] is encouraging women to take folic acid every day **before** they get pregnant in order to reduce birth defects.

**Why are you doing this campaign?**

Many people may have heard of folic acid, but very few women realize that they need to take it before they get pregnant for it to be effective. If a woman takes 0.4 milligrams (400 micrograms) of folic acid every day before she is pregnant and during the early stages of pregnancy, she can reduce the risk of having a baby with birth defects of the spine and brain.

**What are the birth defects that can be prevented?**

Folic acid helps prevent certain birth defects of the spine and brain that are also called neural tube defects. The most common of these birth defects is spina bifida, which is the leading cause of childhood paralysis. Another is anencephaly, which affects the brain and is always fatal.

**How widespread are these birth defects?**

These are common, serious birth defects, affecting approximately 4,000 pregnancies each year in the United States and [number] in our state. The good news, however, is that they are largely preventable. This number could be dramatically decreased if more women took folic acid every day.

**Is this something that could happen to anyone?**

Any woman may have an affected pregnancy. Most of these pregnancies occur to women who have no family history of these birth defects.

**How does folic acid prevent these birth defects from occurring?**

Folic acid is a B vitamin essential to proper cell division and growth. It promotes the healthy development of the baby's neural tube, which becomes the baby's spine and brain. Because this growth occurs very early in pregnancy, it is vital that women have a sufficient level of folic acid in their body before conception.

### **How can women get the right amount of folic acid?**

A convenient way is to take a vitamin with folic acid every day or eat a serving of breakfast cereal that is fortified with 100 percent of the daily value of folic acid. Most multivitamins contain the daily recommended amount of 0.4 milligrams (400 micrograms). Some foods are fortified with folic acid, including some cereals, breads, rice, and pastas. In addition, women should be sure to eat a healthy diet, including food rich in folate, such as orange juice, leafy green vegetables, and beans.

### **Why don't more women take folic acid?**

Only about one quarter of women are currently getting enough folic acid. Some women may not know about folic acid, but many may think it only applies to women who are already pregnant. However, because it needs to be taken before pregnancy, and because half of all pregnancies are unplanned, it is important that **all** women of childbearing age take it every day.

### **Do women need to be concerned about getting too much folic acid?**

Unless a physician recommends it, women should not take more than 1 milligram (1,000 micrograms) of folic acid per day. This has been set as a safe upper limit. It would be hard to exceed it, though, unless you were taking more than one multivitamin a day.

## **D.1.b. Newspaper Pitch**

You're calling the newspaper's health reporter to encourage her to do a story on the need for all women to take folic acid before they get pregnant. The reporter remembers doing a story on folic acid not too long ago. How can you convince the reporter that this new angle deserves further coverage?

After the reporter answers the phone you say:

*Hi, my name is [name]\_\_ with [organization]\_\_. Is this a good time for you? I sent you some information on a new campaign about folic acid preventing birth defects. If you have some time to talk, I'd like to tell you about some important news that your readers may be interested in.*

### **We've already done a story on folic acid. I don't think we'll do anything else on the topic just now.**

Thank you for the earlier story. Folic acid has been in the news, and general awareness of folic acid has grown. However, we're highlighting some interesting new information in our campaign that dramatically affects its preventive effect. We've found that most women do not realize that folic acid must be taken **before** pregnancy to be effective. If a woman waits until she is pregnant to take it, then it may be too late. According to recent statistics, less than one in ten women are aware of this fact.

### **Why does folic acid have to be taken before pregnancy?**

The types of birth defects that folic acid helps prevent occur very early in pregnancy, often before most women know they are pregnant. In order to have enough folic acid in their bodies at that early stage, women should take it every day for at least one month before pregnancy and through the first few weeks of pregnancy to be most effective.

### **Are these birth defects very rare?**

These birth defects, called neural tube defects, are common and severe, affecting up to 4,000 pregnancies each year in the United States. Spina bifida, which affects the spine, is the leading cause of childhood paralysis, and anencephaly is a fatal condition that affects the brain.

### **How many pregnancies are affected in our area?**

[Check this statistic ahead of time and have it on hand to demonstrate local relevance. If state or other local figures are not available, supplement the above by adding that about 1 out of every 1,000 infants born in the United States has either spina bifida or anencephaly.]

### **Are these birth defects genetic?**

We don't know exactly what causes them, but it is probably a combination of genetic, environmental, and dietary factors. We do know, however, that taking 0.4 milligrams of folic acid (that's 400 micrograms) every day before pregnancy and during the early stages of pregnancy can reduce the risk of these birth defects by up to 70 percent. Although Hispanic women and Caucasian women of Celtic descent may have a slightly higher risk, any woman can have an affected pregnancy.

### **Does this advice apply to all women?**

All women of childbearing age should take folic acid every day, since half of all pregnancies are unplanned. It's important that women know to take it **before** pregnancy. That's why we're participating in this new campaign with the National Council on Folic Acid, working with [name partners, such as local doctors, other local NCFA affiliates] to get this message out.

### **Please resend me the information, and we'll consider the story. Do you have any local doctors who are experts?**

Thank you. This story would help your audience and reduce birth defects. We have a number of local experts you can talk with. I'll send you the list with brief bios. I'll check back with you to see if you need anything else.

## **D.1.c. Radio Remote**

Your local radio station is doing a live remote from your "Before You're Pregnant" health fair. You want to use this opportunity to talk about the health fair and get more people to come to it, but you also want to make sure that you communicate the key message about folic acid. For your interview, try to find a quiet place where you are not likely to be interrupted.



**We're here at [location] for the "Before You're Pregnant" health fair, talking with [your name]. Tell me about what you're doing today?**

[Name of organization] is hosting this fair today to provide women with free pre-pregnancy advice and information. Whether or not you are currently thinking about getting pregnant, there's a lot you can do now to ensure a healthy pregnancy when you are ready.

**What are some of the things you can do?**

In addition to eating right, exercising, and getting plenty of rest, there are several things you can do before getting pregnant to have a healthy baby – some of which you may not be aware. For instance, you may have heard about folic acid, the B vitamin that can help prevent birth defects – but you may not know that you should take it every day before you get pregnant for it to be most effective.

**Why is that?**

The birth defects that folic acid helps prevent develop very early during pregnancy, before most women know they are pregnant. Because it takes some time for your body to build up sufficient stores of folic acid, you need to take it every day for at least a month before conception.

**How can you get folic acid?**

A convenient way to get the right amount of folic acid every day is to take a multivitamin or a folic acid pill or to eat a serving of a breakfast cereal fortified with 100 percent of the recommended daily value. In addition, we should all eat a balanced diet including foods rich in folate, such as leafy green vegetables, orange juice, and beans.

**What else can you do before you get pregnant?**

[Depending on your activity and the amount of time allotted for the interview, you may want to highlight such advice as: not smoking, not drinking alcohol, not using drugs, staying away from toxic chemicals in the home and at work, not handling cat litter, etc. Also, if the fair is offering mini check-ups use this time to promote them. This is also a good time to discuss the need for immunizations and the importance of other health-related topics for those thinking about becoming pregnant.]

**What about women who aren't planning to get pregnant?**

Many pregnancies are unplanned or mistimed. It's estimated that half of all pregnancies in the United States are not planned, so this information is just as important for all women who are capable of becoming pregnant. You may think it can't happen to you, but, if you are sexually active, it could. Any birth control method can fail. By the time you realize that you are pregnant, those first few weeks that are so important to your baby's health have already passed. Exercising, eating right, and taking folic acid are good for you as well as your future baby.

**Any final words for our listeners?**

Take care of yourself and your future baby by taking folic acid now – before you are pregnant. It's an easy thing to do to give your baby a healthy start. The time to prevent birth defects is **before** you know you are pregnant. Get enough folic acid every day by taking a vitamin as part

of a healthy diet that contains fortified foods, such as breads, cereals, rice, and pasta, and foods with folate, like leafy green vegetables, beans, and orange juice.

[If the interviewer does not do so, mention again the location of the health fair, hours of operation, directions if needed, and the fact that it is free to the public.]

## **D.2. Media Q & A**

*The following pages are sample questions that you may get from the media and that you will want to be prepared to answer. These are for your reference, not for distribution. You can expect that other questions may be asked.*

### **What is folic acid?**

Folic acid is an essential B vitamin that has been proven to help prevent neural tube defects when taken daily by women of childbearing age.

### **What birth defects does it prevent?**

Folic acid can help prevent birth defects of the spine and brain, which are called neural tube defects (also referred to as NTDs). The two most common NTDs are spina bifida and anencephaly.

### **How common are these birth defects? How serious are they?**

Neural tube defects are common, serious birth defects that affect about 4,000 pregnancies each year in the United States. Approximately 1 out of every 1,000 infants born in the United States has spina bifida or anencephaly.

Spina bifida, which affects the spine, is the leading cause of childhood paralysis. Anencephaly, an NTD that affects the brain, is less common but always fatal, resulting in miscarriage, stillbirth, or a baby who lives only a few hours or days.

### **What causes these birth defects?**

Although we do not fully understand the causes of these birth defects, we do know that they occur when the neural tube, which later becomes the baby's spine and brain, fails to close properly. Spina bifida occurs when the bottom part of the neural tube does not close properly, leaving the spinal cord exposed. Anencephaly occurs when the top part of the neural tube does not close properly. This condition is marked by the incomplete development of the skull bones and a partial or completely absent brain.

What we do know is that these birth defects are largely preventable when women of childbearing age take 0.4 milligrams (400 micrograms) of synthetic folic acid every day **before** they are pregnant.

### **Who is most at risk of having a baby with these birth defects?**

Any woman can have an NTD-affected pregnancy. Ninety-five percent of all such pregnancies occur among women with no history of birth defects in their families. However, women who

have had an affected pregnancy are 20 times more likely to have another affected pregnancy. Caucasian women of Celtic descent and Hispanic women also have a slightly higher risk.

### **How effective is folic acid in reducing their occurrence?**

Comprehensive studies in the early 1990's found that 0.4 milligrams (400 micrograms) of folic acid taken every day can reduce the incidence of these birth defects by up to 70 percent. If all women of childbearing age consumed the recommended daily allowance of folic acid every day, it is estimated that up to 3,000, or three quarters, of these birth defects could be prevented every year.

### **How much folic acid do women need to take?**

To prevent birth defects, the recommended daily allowance of folic acid is 0.4 milligrams (400 micrograms). Because any woman can have an NTD-affected pregnancy, it is important that all women of childbearing age take this amount of folic acid every day. It is also important that women take folic acid at least one month before they become pregnant.

### **Why do women need to take it before pregnancy?**

Because these birth defects occur very early in pregnancy, before most women realize they're pregnant, women should take folic acid at least one month before pregnancy to store sufficient amounts in their bodies. In addition, because half of all pregnancies in the United States are unplanned, all women of childbearing years, regardless of whether they are planning to become pregnant or not, should make folic acid consumption a part of their daily routine.

### **What is folate, and how does it differ from folic acid?**

Folate refers to the vitamin as it naturally occurs in foods, such as leafy green vegetables, orange juice, and beans. Folic acid refers to the synthetic vitamin found in multivitamins, supplements, and fortified foods, such as cereal, bread, pasta, and rice. While the terms are often used interchangeably, it is important to note that it is easier for the body to use synthetic folic acid. This means that it is easier to get enough folic acid through a multivitamin or fortified foods, such as breakfast cereals, than through a diet with a large amount of natural folate.

### **Is there a danger of taking too much folic acid?**

Unless recommended by a health provider, consumption should not exceed 1 milligram (1,000 micrograms) per day. Although the effects of higher intake are not well known, this limit has been set because it could complicate the diagnosis of a type of anemia that is caused by a deficiency of vitamin B12, especially among older people. Unless a woman takes more than one multivitamin per day, it would be difficult to exceed this limit.

### **What are the best sources of folic acid?**

There are two main ways women can get folic acid:

1. By taking a multivitamin with folic acid or a single folic acid supplement. Most multivitamins contain the recommended daily amount of folic acid of 0.4 milligrams (400 micrograms).

2. By eating foods fortified with folic acid, such as breakfast cereals, bread, rice, and pasta made with enriched flour or grain. Many breakfast cereals now contain 400 micrograms of folic acid per serving. It is important for women getting their folic acid through food to read product labels and make sure they are consuming 400 micrograms.

In addition, all women should eat a diet containing foods naturally rich in folate, such as leafy green vegetables, orange juice, beans, and lentils. Labels on fortified and folate-rich foods will state whether they are good sources of folic acid. However, even these foods may not provide enough folic acid every day to prevent these birth defects for most women. Taking a vitamin with folic acid or a single folic acid supplement is the easiest way for women to be sure they are getting enough folic acid every day.

### **Can most women get enough folic acid by modifying their diets?**

Although all women are encouraged to eat a healthy diet, including foods rich in folate, it can be difficult to get enough every day through diet alone. A woman's body needs about twice as much folate as folic acid to do the same job, and that amount can be difficult to get every day.

### **What about women who can't take or can't afford a multivitamin?**

Some women who have difficulty taking a multivitamin might have problems with another mineral in the vitamin, such as iron. In other cases, women may simply find a multivitamin hard to swallow. These women could take a folic acid supplement, which is very small, easy to swallow, and inexpensive. For women who just don't like taking any vitamin pills at all, many brands of breakfast cereal are fortified with 100% of the recommended daily amount of folic acid.

### **Why aren't multivitamins and folic acid supplements covered by health insurance and Medicaid?**

They are not considered medicines and are widely available over the counter, without a prescription. However, when a woman has previously had an NTD-affected pregnancy, a physician may prescribe folic acid supplements.

### **What are other health benefits to taking folic acid?**

As an essential vitamin, folic acid plays an important role in cell division and growth. In addition to ensuring the healthy development of the baby, it is beneficial throughout life in the maintenance of the healthy cells. Some studies have linked folic acid to a reduction in heart disease, cervical and colon cancers, and other birth defects, such as cleft lip, cleft palate, and heart defects. Members of the National Council support continued research in these areas.

### **What is the National Council on Folic Acid, and what are the organization's goals?**

The National Council on Folic Acid is a group of organizations with a common interest in reducing birth defects. NCFA's goal is to reduce the incidence of preventable NTDs by increasing the number of women of childbearing age who take the recommended amount of folic acid every day.

### **Why are you doing this campaign?**

This campaign from NCFA is designed to communicate the important message to women that they should take folic acid every day **before** they get pregnant, because if women wait until they are pregnant, it may be too late. In addition, because half of all pregnancies in the United States are unplanned, it is important that all women who could possibly become pregnant make folic acid part of their daily routine now. It's an easy thing to do to help ensure a healthy baby.

### **What organizations comprise NCFA?\***

NCFA is led by the National Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Coalition, which provides management of NCFA activities, coordination of member programs, and funding for NCFA meetings.

Alliance of Genetic Support Groups	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
American Academy of Family Physicians	Council for Responsible Nutrition
American Academy of Pediatrics	Health Resources and Services Administration
American Academy of Physician Assistants	March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation
American Association of Health Plans	National Association of Hispanic Nurses
American College of Medical Genetics	National Association of Neonatal Nurses
American College of Nurse Practitioners	National Association of Nurse Practitioners in Women's Health
American College of Nurse-Midwives	National Association of Pediatric Nurse Associates & Practitioners
American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists	National Association of School Nurses, Inc.
American College of Physicians – American Society of Internal Medicine	National Association of WIC Directors
American College of Preventive Medicine	National Birth Defects Prevention Network
American Dietetic Association	National Black Nurses Association
American Medical Association	National Alliance for Hispanic Health
American Medical Student Association	National Council on La Raza
American Medical Women's Association	National Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Coalition
American Pharmaceutical Association	National Perinatal Association
American Society for Reproductive Medicine	National Society of Genetic Counselors
The Arc of the United States	Pan American Health Organization
Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs	Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
Association of Reproductive Health Professionals	Shriners Hospitals for Children
Association of State and Territorial Health Office	Spina Bifida Association of America
Association of State and Territorial Public Health Nutrition Directors	The Teratology Society
Association of Women's Health, Obstetric, and Neonatal Nurses	University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
	USA Dry Pea & Lentil Council
	Wheat Foods Council

*\*As of January 19, 2002.*

## **Appendix E: Follow-Up Materials**

### **E.1. Sample Follow-up Email to Public Service Directors**

*Note: You can modify the sample email below. You will want to track when the PSAs run so you can include that information in any post-campaign evaluation.*

#### **Sample Subject Line: *Keeping Track of [Name of PSA]***

Dear [Name]:

We greatly appreciate your station's support of the campaign to raise awareness among women of childbearing age about the importance of folic acid. With your help, we will be able to educate women about how they can reduce their children's risk of being born with a serious birth defect.

We are trying to keep track of where and how often [Name of PSA] ran. This will help us evaluate how well this PSA is communicating the folic acid message to women in our community. To that end, I would appreciate it if you would email me back with the dates and times [Name of PSA] is scheduled to air on your station.

Thank you once again for your time and assistance.

Best regards,  
Name  
Title  
Organization

## **E.2. Media Tracking Log**

Date:

Handled By:

### **Media Contact/Title:**

Media Outlet/Type:

Phone/Email/Fax/Mailing Address:

### **Inquiry Type:**

Proactive pitch

Incoming call from reporter

### **Inquiry:**

Date Inquiry Taken:

Deadline:

### **Response:**

Date Response(s) Given:

### **Additional Notes:**

Interview arranged; with:

Date:

Time:

Topic:

Story to run on:

Publication/Station circulation/audience size:

Interested in using us as topic expert for the future

### **E. 3. Press Release Checklist**

1. Are the contact names and phone numbers included on the top of the release?
2. Is the date correctly labeled for the day it will be distributed?
3. Does it have a one-line title?
4. Is the lead paragraph direct and to the point? Does it contain the most important and interesting aspects of the story?
5. Has the local angle been emphasized?
6. Have the Who, What, When, Where, and Why been answered in the first few paragraphs?
7. Are the sentences short and concise? Are the paragraphs short? Are the words common and concrete?
8. Has editorial comment been placed in quotation marks and attributed to the appropriate person? Has this person approved this quote for distribution to the media?
9. Are quotations natural – that is, do they sound as though they could have been spoken?
10. Has any medical jargon been explained in plain English for the average reader? Overall, is the release written for the common person (if the release is targeted at a general audience)?
11. Are spelling and punctuation correct (including names, titles, and organizations)?
12. Have all statements been double-checked for accuracy?





# Appendix F: Research Information

## New Data To Use To Design Your Own Campaign

### March of Dimes

A 2000 March of Dimes survey, conducted by The Gallup Organization under a grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, revealed the following about women and folic acid:

- Most women who take a multivitamin containing the B vitamin folic acid take them too late to prevent neural tube defects.
- Only 34 percent of American women 18-45 years of age who are not pregnant take a daily vitamin containing folic acid. This percentage drops to only 19 percent among women 18-24 years of age, yet this age group accounts for 32 percent of all births in the United States.
- The number of women who have heard of folic acid has increased from 52 percent in 1995 to 75 percent in 2000. Yet there has been only a slight corresponding increase in the number of women taking a multivitamin containing folic acid every day.
- Only 14 percent of those surveyed knew folic acid prevents birth defects, and only 10 percent knew that folic acid should be taken daily **before** pregnancy.
- The survey is based on telephone interviews with a national sample of 2,115 women ages 18-45 (error range is plus or minus three percentage points).

### Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

CDC conducted focus group research to evaluate knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about multivitamin usage and folic acid, with both women who are, and who are not, contemplating pregnancy. The following information was revealed:

#### Women contemplating pregnancy

- Women 18-35 years of age who are planning to get pregnant are more open to messages about a healthy pregnancy. Eighty-four percent of such women said they would take a multivitamin and/or folic acid to prevent birth defects.
- They don't know when to take folic acid to achieve its benefits in preventing NTDs.

- They think that a good diet meets their needs but do not know how much and which foods they would need to eat to get the required amount of folic acid daily.
- Of these women, 55 percent are not taking a multivitamin. They tend to be middle-income, live in non-urban environments, and are likely to be married and have children.

#### Women not contemplating pregnancy

- Women ages 18-35 who are not currently thinking about pregnancy are more resistant to behavior changes that could prevent birth defects.
- Since they are not planning a pregnancy, the folic acid message of birth defect prevention has less relevance in their daily lives.
- They tend to think that their diet alone is good enough, and they have barriers to taking a multivitamin containing folic acid every day. These barriers include cost, remembering to take it every day, and unfounded concerns about weight gain.
- Of these women, 77 percent are not taking a daily multivitamin with folic acid. These women tend to live in urban environments and are less likely to be married.