

## Preventing Birth Defects

# Folic Acid

## A Guide for Dietitians



The U.S. Public Health Service recommends that all women who are capable of becoming pregnant consume folic acid every day to reduce their risk for having a pregnancy affected with spina bifida, anencephaly, or other neural tube defects (NTDs).

Taken periconceptionally, folic acid, a B vitamin, can prevent 50%-70% of NTDs. Folic acid also decreases blood homocysteine levels and may reduce the risk for cardiovascular disease and some cancers.

## Did you know?

Only 10%-15% of women know that they need folic acid before and in the first weeks of pregnancy.

Women report that they are more likely to consume folic acid if encouraged by their health care provider.

## Timing and Dosage

- **Every day!** NTDs occur approximately 3-4 weeks after conception, before most women realize they are pregnant.
- **Regardless of pregnancy intention:** About half of pregnancies are unplanned.
- **400 mcg (0.40 mg) of folic acid every day** for all women who are capable of becoming pregnant.
- **To prevent recurrence:** 4,000 mcg (4.0 mg) of folic acid. Women who have had a previous NTD-affected pregnancy should plan their pregnancies so they can get a prescription for 4,000 mcg every day before becoming pregnant.

# OPPORTUNITIES AND STRATEGIES FOR YOUR PRACTICE:

**T**he folic acid message is simple and effective and can take less than a minute: "Folic acid is a B vitamin that prevents certain birth defects and may reduce your risk for heart disease and certain cancers. Make sure you get enough folic acid every day through a multivitamin or folic acid pill and eat a healthy diet. Here are some of the ways you can get the full amount your body needs:

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

Talk to patients during visits such as:

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

For more information: Contact your local March of Dimes, Spina Bifida Association, Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies chapters, or CDC at:

[www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/folicacid](http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/folicacid)  
[Flo@cdc.gov](mailto:Flo@cdc.gov)  
1-888-232-6789

