

January is Birth Defects Prevention Month

Focus on Spina Bifida and Anencephaly

Major structural or genetic birth defects affect 2 to 3 babies of every 100 babies born. The chances your baby may be affected by some of these can be reduced by mom's health habits. Not smoking, avoiding all alcohol are important steps to take when it is possible you might get pregnant or are planning to get pregnant. What you eat can also make a difference. Let me tell you one example how.



Women should take 400 mcg of folic acid every day, starting at least one month before getting pregnant, to help prevent major birth defects of the baby's brain and spine.

About folic acid

Folic acid is a B vitamin. Our bodies use it to make new cells. Everyone needs folic acid.

Why folic acid is so important

Folic acid is very important because it can prevent major [birth defects](#) of the baby's brain and spine. Two of them are spina bifida and anencephaly.

Spina bifida is a condition that affects the spine and is usually apparent at birth. It is a type of neural tube defect (NTD). Each year about 1,500 babies are born in the U.S. with this problem. <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/spinabifida/data.html>

Spina bifida can happen anywhere along the spine if the neural tube does not close all the way. The backbone that protects the spinal cord does not form and close as it should. This often results in damage to the spinal cord and nerves.

Spina bifida might cause physical and intellectual disabilities that range from mild to severe. The severity depends on:

- The size and location of the opening in the spine.
- Whether part of the spinal cord and nerves are affected.

Anencephaly is a serious birth defect in which a baby is born without parts of the brain and skull. It is a type of neural tube defect (NTD). These are birth defects that happen during the first month of pregnancy, usually before a woman knows she is pregnant. As the neural tube forms and closes, it helps form the baby's brain and skull (upper part of the neural tube), spinal cord, and back bones (lower part of the neural tube). An estimated 150 U.S. babies (1 baby in 10,000) is born with anencephaly.

A woman needs 400 micrograms (mcg) every day. Taking more is not known to help and taking more than 1,000mcg a day is not recommended.

When to start taking folic acid

For folic acid to help prevent some major birth defects, a woman needs to start taking it at least one month before she becomes pregnant and while she is pregnant.

Every woman needs folic acid every day, whether she's planning to get pregnant or not, for the healthy new cells the body makes daily. Think about the skin, hair, and nails. These – and other parts of the body – make new cells each day.

How a woman can get enough folic acid

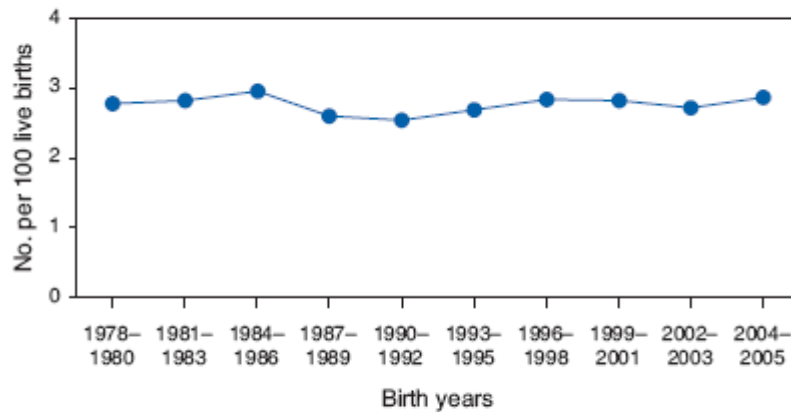
There are two easy ways to be sure to get enough folic acid each day:

1. Take a vitamin that has folic acid in it every day.
 1. Most multivitamins sold in the United States have the amount of folic acid women need each day. Women can also choose to take a small pill (supplement) that has only folic acid in it each day.
 2. Multivitamins and folic acid pills can be found at most local pharmacy, grocery, or discount stores. Check the label to be sure it contains 100% of the daily value (DV) of folic acid, which is 400 micrograms (mcg).
2. Eat a bowl of breakfast [cereal that has 100% of the daily value of folic acid every day \(to find out if yours does go to <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/folicacid/cereals.html>\)](http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/folicacid/cereals.html).
 1. Not every cereal has this amount. Check the label on the side of the box, and look for one that has “100%” next to folic acid.

We can't prevent all birth defects but how we treat and nourish our bodies can prevent some of them. Avoiding tobacco, alcohol and drugs can help. A good diet helps. Folic Acid is a vitamin that in the proper amount can help.

Tables and links

FIGURE. Overall prevalence of major structural or genetic birth defects,* by selected maternal and infant characteristics and maternal race/ethnicity — Metropolitan Atlanta Congenital Defects Program (MACDP), 1978–2005†



* MACDP defines major structural or genetic birth defects as conditions that 1) result from a malformation, deformation, or disruption in one or more parts of the body, a chromosomal abnormality, or a known clinical syndrome; 2) are present at birth; and 3) have a serious, adverse effect on health, development, or functional ability.

† 2005 data are preliminary. Mantel-Haenszel test for trend, $p = 0.19$.

[birth defects](http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/birthdefects/index.html)(<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/birthdefects/index.html>)

([anencephaly](http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/birthdefects/anencephaly.html)(<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/birthdefects/anencephaly.html>))

and [spina bifida](http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/spinabifida)(<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/spinabifida>)).

Facts About Folic Acid



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