

Preventing Birth Defects Starts Before You Are Pregnant

By Caren Fairweather

January is National Birth Defects Month, and the week of January 4-10 is Folic Acid Awareness Week. As you may know, there is a relationship between folic acid and birth defects.

Many birth defects of the brain and spine, called neural tube defects, occur in the first few weeks of pregnancy, often before a woman knows she is pregnant. The good news is that 70% of neural tube defects are preventable by taking a B vitamin, folic acid, every day *before* a woman becomes pregnant. Even if you are not planning to get pregnant in the near future we know that at least 50% of pregnancies are not planned. For teens and women in their early twenty's, that rate increases to about 80%. That is why it is so crucial that all women of child bearing age get 400 micrograms of folic acid daily.

Most multiple vitamins contain the recommended amount of folic acid as well as many other vitamins that protect women's and infants' health like vitamins A, C, and E and minerals like calcium. While taking a multiple vitamin every day makes good sense, we also need to eat a variety of healthy foods in addition to taking supplements for overall heart health, to prevent chronic diseases like diabetes, and to maintain a healthy weight.

Two portions, or one cup of fortified grains and cereals or whole grains, contain nearly half the folic acid you need in a day. Read the labels on cereals and grains like rice, pasta, and breads to help you select products that provide at least 10% of the recommended daily requirement per serving.

Studies have shown that taking folic acid for a year before getting pregnant also significantly reduces the risk of giving birth too early. More than 1 in 10 babies in our region is born premature. And while about 2% of those early births are not preventable by lifestyle changes, more than 8% may be affected by choices like taking folic acid, not smoking or drinking alcohol, practicing good oral health habits, and being treated for chronic illnesses and infections.

The need for folic acid increases during pregnancy. As soon as you think you may be pregnant see your health care provider, who will prescribe prenatal vitamins that contain the recommended vitamin and mineral supplements to support the development of a healthy baby.

The prevalence of diabetes in women of childbearing age has doubled in the last ten years. Keeping blood glucose in the target range before and during pregnancy is another important way to prevent birth defects. Pregnant women with uncontrolled blood sugar may have babies that are too large for vaginal delivery, babies that have high blood sugar soon after they are born, or a greater risk of babies born with brain, spinal cord or heart conditions. If you are a woman of child bearing age with pre-diabetes or diabetes, visit your health care provider to get help controlling your blood glucose, and take your multi-vitamins every day.

Staying healthy throughout the lifespan will help safeguard your future health and the health of your future children. Learn what you can do and start the New Year with a goal

of taking multivitamins every day. Ask your pharmacist for low cost, high quality products that fit the bill.

Caren Fairweather is the executive director of Maternal-Infant Services Network (MISN) of Orange, Sullivan and Ulster Counties, a not-for-profit organization that coordinates health and human services for pregnant women and children. MISN helps people enroll in Child Health Plus and Family Health Plus health insurance and offers comprehensive childbirth and parenting preparation courses in Orange, Sullivan and Ulster Counties – visit our website at www.misn-ny.org or call us at 800-453-4666 for a schedule of classes.