



Folic acid vital for women

Is there a new recommendation for folic acid for adult women?

Well, a new recommendation announced in May made guidelines, in place for several years, even stronger.

The organization making the new recommendation, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, published an update of its 1996 guidelines in the May 5 issue of the *Annals of Internal Medicine*. The earlier recommendation suggested that pregnant women and women who were planning to become pregnant take a daily multivitamin with 0.4 to 0.8 milligrams of folic acid as a way to prevent neural tube defects — serious brain and spinal birth defects — in newborns. At that time, the task force also recommended that all women of child-bearing age consider taking such a multivitamin, but listed that portion of the recommendation as offering just a “moderate” benefit, instead of a “substantial” one.

The new recommendation goes a step further, saying that there is indeed a substantial benefit for all women of child-bearing age to take a daily folic acid supplement or multivitamin containing folic acid.

The adjustment is not a big one, but it's an important message for women to hear. The birth defects prevented by folic acid (a B vitamin) occur in the first few weeks of pregnancy, often before a woman finds out that she is pregnant. Since about half of all pregnancies in the United States are unplanned, all women of child-bearing age, including teens,

should get in the habit of taking folic acid each and every day, even if they are not planning to get pregnant. For folic acid to help, a woman needs to take it before she becomes pregnant.

In 1998, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration began requiring that all enriched grains be fortified with folic acid. Since then, the incidence of neural tube defects in the U.S. has declined by 26 percent. Still, more needs to be done. With the popularity of carbohydrate-restricted diets, even with the fortification, many women just don't get enough folic acid.

A 2008 March of Dimes survey conducted by the Gallup organization revealed that only 11 percent of women knew that folic acid should be taken prior to becoming pregnant. And, although 39 percent of women reported taking folic acid or a multivitamin containing folic acid daily, only 27 percent of younger women (ages 18 to 24) said that they do. And, only 17 percent of Spanish-speaking women in the United States are taking folic acid daily. Those are significant populations of women who may become pregnant, and represent just how many women need to know of this easy way to prevent severe birth defects.

For more information about the importance of folic acid, see the CDC's Web page on the topic, <http://www.cdc.gov/Features/FolicAcid/>.

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