



Women's Health Alert

Reducing The Risk Of Birth Defects

by Jeffrey Ellis, M.D.,

(NAPSA)—Good news: awareness about the importance of folate during pregnancy is on the rise. The bad news: almost 70 percent of women of childbearing age (18 to 45) don't get enough of this essential B vitamin.

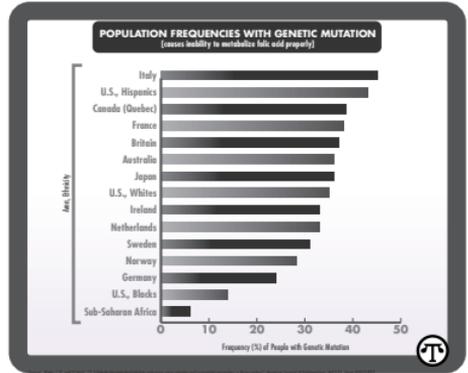
The March of Dimes, the leading organization for the prevention of birth defects in the U.S., has long recommended that all women of childbearing age get at least 400 mcg of folate per day. People with a certain genetic mutation can't because they don't properly metabolize folic acid.

Folate is a B-Complex vitamin. It's found in raw fruits and vegetables, in some whole grains and legumes and nuts. Folate is essential for the development of red blood cells and key to the neurological growth of a baby. Not getting enough folate in the first few weeks after conception may cause Neural Tube Defects, life-threatening birth defects. The Centers for Disease Control recommends all women of childbearing age take folate supplements.

About 2,500 babies are born with NTDs each year and many other affected pregnancies end in miscarriage or stillbirth.

The most common NTDs are spina bifida and anencephaly. Children with the severe form of spina bifida have some paralysis and bladder and bowel problems. Anencephaly is a fatal condition in which the baby has an underdeveloped brain and skull.

A study published in the American Journal of Epidemiology identified that one in eight people have difficulty metabolizing folic acid because of a genetic mutation. The study shows significant variances



Studies show that if all women consumed the recommended amount of folate into the first month of pregnancy, up to 70 percent of all Neural Tube Defects could be prevented.

in the rate of this mutation, with the rate within Hispanic groups being as frequent as 1:5. The rate of NTDs remains higher in this ethnic group than any other.

Every woman of childbearing age needs to eat a healthy diet rich in fortified grains, nuts and legumes, raw vegetables and fresh fruits. Those who cannot get the recommended daily allowance for folate need to take a multivitamin containing a form of folic acid that is already broken down and can be immediately absorbed by the body regardless of the presence of a genetic mutation. Women who are planning a pregnancy should take a prenatal vitamin such as Prenate Elite, which contains Metafolin, a bioavailable form of folic acid the body can readily absorb.

By planning ahead and making necessary changes, women can increase their chances of delivering a healthy baby.

• *Dr. Ellis is professor of obstetrics and gynecology, Medical College of Georgia.*