

Preventing Neural Tube Birth Defects With Folic Acid

Neural Tube Defects

One simple way to reduce your risk of having a baby with a neural tube defect is by getting enough folic acid. This B9 vitamin can cut that risk by half before conception and during early pregnancy.

In the U.S., about 2,500 infants are born each year with neural tube defects. These develop in a baby's central nervous system and affect the brain or spine.

There are two types of neural tube defects in which:

- a baby's spine does not close. Instead, the spinal cord sticks out of the baby's back. This disorder is called spina bifida. Surgery can help correct this disorder. Often, adults with spina bifida suffer from paralysis or bladder problems.
- a baby's head does not close. Instead, the brain stem sticks out of the baby's head. There is no brain, only a brain stem. This disorder is called anencephaly. Babies are often delivered stillborn or die within hours (or days) of birth.

Folic Acid

This B vitamin is also known as folate. It is important for cell growth, strong blood and reducing your risk of cardiovascular (heart) disease and neural tube defects.

If you plan to become pregnant, are sexually active or are in the first trimester of pregnancy, you should get 400 mcg (equal to 0.4 mg) of folic acid every day.

Folic acid is found in many foods:

- dark green leafy vegetables
- citrus fruits (including orange juice)
- whole grains (including fortified cereals)
- potatoes
- beans
- nuts
- seeds.

Folic acid is also available as an over-the-counter vitamin supplement. Talk with your health care provider about the right amount of folic acid for you. Taking too much may be harmful to you or your baby.