Folic Acid Promotion and Monitoring in a Pregnancy and Parenting Program for Adolescents

Suzanne Haydu, MPH, RD; Flojaune Griffin, PhD, MPH; Sangi Rajbhandari, MPH; Jennifer Troyan, MPH
California Department of Public Health; Maternal, Child & Adolescent Health Division

PURPOSE: To Reduce the Risk of Neural Tube Defects, Adolescents Should Consume at Least 400 µg of Folic Acid Daily

Folic Acid: Every Woman, Every Day

Folate, an essential nutrient, is a water-soluble B vitamin. Folic Acid is the form of folate that is found in supplements and added to fortified foods. Folic Acid is approximately twice as bioavailable as naturally occurring food folate. Everyone requires daily folate / folic acid. Folate helps create and maintain cells. This is especially important during periods of rapid cell division and tissue growth such as infancy and pregnancy. Women of childbearing age can improve birth outcomes and decrease the risk of birth defects by ensuring adequate folic acid intake. Daily consumption of folic acid prior to pregnancy reduces the risk of neural tube defects (NTDs) by 50-70%. NTDs are serious birth defects of the spine (spina bifida) and brain (anecephaly).

It is recommended that women begin taking folic acid prior to pregnancy, during pregnancy and lactation. In addition to a healthy diet, women of childbearing age should consume 400 micrograms (µg) of synthetic folic acid every day. There are two ways to get 400 µg of synthetic folic acid daily:
- Eat one serving of a cereal that has 100% of the daily value (DV) of folic acid. Many cereals do not have enough folic acid, so it is important to read the nutrition label. OR
- Take a vitamin pill that has all of the folic acid you need every day.

Adolescence Is An Important Time For Folic Acid

Adolescence is an important time to encourage folic acid intake because, overwhelmingly, pregnancies during this time are unplanned. Additionally, habits established during adolescence may continue throughout the lifespan. As adolescents rarely are planning to become pregnant, traditional folic acid messages about birth defects prevention may not be effective. Focusing on their interests, such as beauty and health, may be more effective. Benefits of healthy skin, hair and nails are of greater interest to adolescents than pregnancy planning. Making folic acid a part of their daily beauty regimen should be encouraged.

Folic Acid Guidelines

Guidelines include:
- What are “Folic Acid” and “Folate”?
- What are the Consequences of Inadequate Folic Acid/Folate Intake?
- How Much Folic Acid/Folate is Enough?
- What is the Status of Folic Acid Intake among Teens?
- How Can Teens Consume Enough Folic Acid?
- What Are Good Sources of Folate?
- Screening
- Interventions
- Follow-Up
- Additional Resources/Web Links

References