

Many pregnant women not getting message about boosting iodine and folic acid

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Credit: University of Otago

New Zealand's Ministry of Health (MOH) rarely recommends using supplements, but does urge mothers to take in additional iodine and folic acid before and during pregnancy, and iodine when breastfeeding, to help avoid neurodevelopmental problems in their babies.

In the first study of its kind gauging how well the MOH's advice in this area is followed, University of Otago researchers reveal barely more than one-third of the Kiwi mothers surveyed report adhering fully to these recommendations.

Women considering pregnancy, who are pregnant, or who are breastfeeding are recommended to take an [iodine](#) supplement each day containing 150mcg of this trace mineral. Iodine is important for optimal foetal and [infant brain development](#), including their IQ later in life. The MOH also recommends that one folic acid tablet (0.8 mg) be taken daily for four weeks before conception through to 12 weeks after becoming pregnant, to help prevent [neural tube defects](#) in their babies.

Dr Andrew Reynolds, research fellow at Otago's Department of Human Nutrition and lead author of the new study appearing in the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, says he and colleagues earlier this year asked [women](#) from all over the country to tell them what supplements they were taking, and when.

"We heard from 535 women who were pregnant, or had been pregnant in the last two years. The responses revealed only 52 per cent of these women were following the iodine recommendation, and only 38 per cent of them followed both the iodine and the folic acid recommendation," Dr Reynolds says.

So what does this mean? Associate Professor Sheila Skeaff, Dr Reynold's colleague and co-author on the paper, says "although these data are from a survey that captures supplement use at one time point, we found the results very interesting".

The paper found that the majority of women (80 per cent) were accessing their iodine with a prescription from a GP or midwife. "The Ministry of Health subsidises the cost of supplements through a

prescription, so it was great to see New Zealand women knew about these prescriptions, and were using them," Associate Professor Skeaff says.

However, the results of the survey suggest only low numbers of women met the Ministry's supplementation recommendations.

"We need to make a bigger effort to promote these recommendations and increase access to iodine and [folic acid](#) supplements – we want communities to know about these nutrients, and why they are important," Associate Professor Skeaff says.

Provided by University of Otago

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