

Folic acid survey of Spanish-speaking women finds most are missing benefits

5 January 2009

Only 17 percent of Spanish-speaking women of childbearing age in the United States are taking a multivitamin containing folic acid daily, according to the first- nationally representative folic acid awareness survey to focus on this population.

Folic acid can prevent neural tube defects (NTDs), serious birth defects of the brain and spine such as spina bifida and anencephaly, which are more prevalent in the Hispanic population than other racial or ethnic groups. Hispanics are the largest and the fastest growing racial and ethnic group in the U.S., according to the U.S. Census Bureau, and they account for more than 23 percent of all births in this country.

Folic Acid Awareness Week is January 5-11, a time when the March of Dimes and other members of the National Council on Folic Acid work to raise awareness of the benefits of this essential B vitamin. Daily consumption of folic acid beginning before and continuing through pregnancy is crucial because NTDs can occur in the early weeks following conception, often before a woman knows she is pregnant.

Two separate surveys by the March of Dimes of women's awareness of folic acid and its benefits are being released today. "Improving Preconception Health: Knowledge and Use of Vitamins and Folic Acid Among Spanish-language-dominant Hispanic Women" was conducted by International Communications Research. They questioned 1,250 women of childbearing age and was funded by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"Improving Preconception Health: Women's Knowledge and Use of Folic Acid," which surveyed more than 2,000 women of all races and ethnicities, was conducted by Gallup and also was funded by the CDC.

"More than half of all pregnancies are unplanned,

which is why it's so important that all women of childbearing age take a multivitamin with at least 400 micrograms of folic acid beginning before and continuing through pregnancy," said Joann Petrini, PhD, MPH, director of the March of Dimes Perinatal Data Center.

Hispanic women and young women (ages 18 to 24) are among the least likely groups in the U.S. to take the recommended amount of folic acid that could lower their babies' risk of developing NTDs.

The March of Dimes survey of women of all races found that nearly 40 percent of U.S. women of childbearing age (ages 18-45), say they take a daily multivitamin supplement containing folic acid. However, the rate drops to 27 percent among women 18 to 24 years old. Only 11 percent of women of childbearing age said they knew that folic acid should be consumed prior to pregnancy.

The March of Dimes has led efforts to raise awareness of the benefits of folic acid since 1992, when the U.S. Public Health Service began recommending that all women capable of becoming pregnant consume folic acid beginning before pregnancy to prevent NTDs.

Also, since 2004, March of Dimes chapters have awarded more than \$1.5 million in community grants and awards to support folic acid education, and have reached more than 4.5 million consumers and health care professionals with folic acid education and materials.

For example, March of Dimes chapters in North Carolina and Florida offer success stories. In North Carolina, there was an 80 percent decline in the number of NTDs between 1995 and 2005, and in Florida, more than 80 percent of women of childbearing age report taking a vitamin containing folic acid before pregnancy.

Since the U.S. Food & Drug Administration began

requiring in 1998 that all enriched grains be fortified with folic acid, NTDs in the U.S. have declined by 26 percent.

Source: March of Dimes Foundation

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