

Script – Print – Delivering the good news about folic acid

One of the best ways for expectant mothers to prevent birth defects is to get enough folic acid on a daily basis. That's the important message being conveyed during Folic Awareness Week September 10-15.

"Folic acid is an important supplement you should be getting during pregnancy," says Casey Sager, MD, an obstetrician/gynecologist (OB/GYN) for OSF HealthCare. "It helps reduce the risk of neural tube defects. It is readily available both in our diet but additionally as a supplement found in most prenatal vitamins."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) encourages all women of reproductive age to take 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid each day, in addition to consuming food with folate, to help prevent some major birth defects in a baby's brain such as anencephaly and spine, including spina bifida. Research has found that the risk for neural tube defects is significantly less when a person gets extra folic acid from a healthy diet from one month before conception through two to three months after becoming pregnant.

"Most prenatal vitamins have at least 400 micrograms of folate or folic acid depending on the brand," says Dr. Sager. "Unless you have a history of neural tube defects 400 micrograms is adequate. If you have a significant history, then we usually recommend an increase in folic acid to four milligrams daily."

To get the recommended dose of 400 mcg of folic acid, the synthetic form of folate, experts agree that eating fortified foods such as breads, breakfast cereals and pastas will help. Other good sources of folate include leafy green vegetables, oranges and bananas, or a combination of both a vitamin and diet.

"You'll find daily sources and that's kind of how they come up with a recommendation for a supplement is knowing that most diets contain a certain amount and then the additional 400 micrograms should get you where you need to be," says Dr. Sager.

Folic acid can help in other ways too. According to some research, there may be benefits when it comes to heart disease, stroke, cancer and depression.

Dr. Sager adds that it's important to stick within the guidelines recommended by your OB/GYN because too much of a good thing is not always good. Too much folic acid can have the opposite effect as far as cognitive and neurocognitive development.

During prenatal visits, your OB/GYN will address the importance of folic acid and answer any questions about diet and supplements to ensure the best care plan for an expectant mother and her baby.

For more information on folic acid, visit [OSF HealthCare](#).