

Task Force Issues Final Recommendation Statement on Folic Acid Supplementation to Prevent Neural Tube Defects

Taking folic acid before and during early pregnancy helps prevent neural tube defects

WASHINGTON, D.C. – August 1, 2023 – The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (Task Force) today published a final recommendation statement on folic acid supplementation to prevent neural tube defects. The Task Force recommends that anyone who is planning to or could become pregnant take a daily supplement containing 0.4 to 0.8 mg of folic acid. **This is an A grade.**

Grade in this recommendation:

A: Recommended.

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Neural tube defects are when the brain or spinal cord does not develop properly in a baby. This occurs early in pregnancy, often before a person knows they are pregnant. Many neural tube defects are caused by low levels of a vitamin called folate in the body, which is found in fruits, vegetables, and other foods. Folic acid is the form of folate that is added to some foods and also found in multivitamins, prenatal vitamins, and single folic acid tablets.

“The Task Force continues to underscore the importance of taking a daily supplement containing folic acid before and during early pregnancy to help protect the health of babies,” says Task Force member Katrina Donahue, M.D., M.P.H. “By taking folic acid, people can reduce the risk of developing neural tube defects, which can result in serious complications for babies including disability and death.”

While all pregnancies are at risk for neural tube defects, there are certain factors that can increase risk. This includes having a family history of neural tube defects, having difficulties absorbing the nutrients from food because of weight loss surgery, and having diabetes or obesity. Additionally, Hispanic and Latina people are at increased risk of developing neural tube defects. It is unclear whether this risk is related to genetics or due to food preferences.

“Folic acid is most beneficial when taken at least one month before pregnancy and continuing through the first trimester,” says Task Force vice chair Wanda Nicholson, M.D., M.P.H., M.B.A. “Because most people do not get enough folate or folic acid in their diet, and neural tube defects occur early in pregnancy, often before a person knows they are pregnant, it is important that anyone who is planning to or could become pregnant take folic acid.”

The Task Force’s final recommendation statement and corresponding evidence summary have been published online in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, as well as on the Task Force website at <http://www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org>. A draft version of the recommendation statement and evidence review were available for public comment from February 21, 2023, to March 20, 2023.

The Task Force is an independent, volunteer panel of national experts in prevention and evidence-based medicine that works to improve the health of people nationwide by making evidence-based recommendations about clinical preventive services such as screenings, counseling services, and preventive medications.

Dr. Donahue is a professor and vice chair of research at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Department of Family Medicine. She is a family physician and senior research fellow at the Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research and the co-director of the North Carolina Network Consortium, a meta-network of six practice-based research networks and four academic institutions in North Carolina.

Dr. Nicholson is a senior associate dean for diversity, equity and inclusion and professor of prevention and community health at the Milken Institute School of Public Health at the George Washington University. She is a member and vice-president-elect of the board of directors of the American Board of Obstetrics & Gynecology; editor, health equity, diversity, and inclusion for the *American Journal of Obstetrics & Gynecology*; past chair of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) Diversity, Equity, and Inclusive Excellence Workgroup; and an immediate past member of the executive board of ACOG.

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