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Take Folic Acid Before Getting Pregnant

By News Canada

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by: **News Canada**

(NC)—Mississauga mother Susan Walsh gives a bottle of multivitamins containing folic acid to the bride-to-be at every wedding shower she attends. This is her way of ensuring that all women take folic acid before getting pregnant, in order to help reduce their risk of having a baby with a birth defect.

In 1996, Susan's son Jacob was born with a mild case of spina bifida. He underwent surgery at 10 weeks, but he still has regular neurological appointments at the Hospital for Sick Children to ensure he stays healthy.

While Susan feels fortunate that Jake was mildly affected by this birth defect, as a parent she can't help but feel responsible for his well-being.

"When I found out that I might have been able to prevent Jacob's birth defect simply by taking a multivitamin everyday, I was shocked," says Susan. "My pregnancy was planned. I quit drinking, smoking and even quit drinking diet cola – one of the hardest vices to give up. I would have taken a multivitamin too, if I'd known how important it was."

It is recommended that all women of childbearing age eat a healthy, well-balanced diet including foods high in folate like asparagus, broccoli, orange juice, lentils and peanut butter. However, even the best food choices will not supply all of the folic acid required. To ensure that a woman is getting enough folic acid to help her reduce the risk of having a baby with a neural tube defect, she should take a daily multivitamin containing a minimum of 0.4mg folic acid.

However, women who are at higher risk of having a pregnancy affected by neural tube defects require a higher dosage of folic acid and should consult with their physicians.

Derryn Gill, Chair of the Spina Bifida & Hydrocephalus Association of Ontario, and mother of a child with spina bifida and hydrocephalus knew about folic acid 22 years ago when she first planned on

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getting pregnant. She was ahead of her time... probably because her sister was a pharmacist. She diligently took her multivitamin and had a healthy baby boy. She continued to take these pills through her second pregnancy however, her second child was born with spina bifida and hydrocephalus.

"I asked myself, 'Why me? What went wrong?'," says Derryn. "There weren't any answers 19 years ago, but the research since then has shown that even though 0.4mg of folic acid is enough to reduce the incidence of spina bifida by as much as 70% for most mothers, women at high risk need to take ten times as much."

Women who are at higher risk of having a baby with a neural tube defect include: those with a family history of neural tube defects, those taking anti-seizure drugs, those of Celtic, Northern Chinese, Cree or Sikh heritage, and those with insulin-dependent diabetes, to name a few. Women that fall into these categories need to take an increased dose of folic acid.

However, Derryn didn't know about these risk factors and, when she found out about them, she didn't feel they applied to her. That is, until her uncle did some family tree research and found that both Derryn and her husband were of Celtic heritage and both had relatives in England with spina bifida.

While Susan Walsh wishes she had heard about folic acid before getting pregnant, Derryn Gill knew about it, and wishes she had known more. They both hope that by spreading the word to other women, they can give them the gift of knowledge that they would have valued years ago. Visit

today.

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Not Enough Women Getting Folic Acid

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(NC)—While most women have heard about folic acid, less than half know it's of benefit to women of childbearing age, according to the Folic Acid Alliance of Ontario. In addition, many women don't know whether they need to take folic acid, and if they do, how much they need or what are its sources.

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Folic acid, the synthetic form of folate, is a B vitamin that contributes to the healthy development of babies. In Canada, it is estimated that four out of every 1,000 children born have a neural tube defect. These are birth defects that affect the brain and spinal cord. They occur shortly after conception, often before a woman knows she's pregnant. The most common defect is spina bifida, which results in the spine not forming completely early in the pregnancy.

Studies show that women who eat a diet rich in folate or foods fortified with folic acid and who take a multivitamin containing at least 0.4 mg of folic acid before pregnancy can reduce the risk of neural tube defects by up to 70 per cent.

It's recommended that women take folic acid at least three months before they get pregnant and throughout the first trimester of their pregnancy. Since not all pregnancies are planned, all women of childbearing age who are sexually active should try to eat foods rich in folic acid, like dark green leafy vegetables, bananas, nuts, and asparagus, as well as foods fortified with folic acid, such as certain breads, rice, and pasta.

Since it is challenging to get folic acid through diet alone, women should also consider taking a daily multivitamin containing a minimum of 0.4 mg folic acid, like Centrum Forte®. For more information on vitamin and mineral supplementation, visit

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