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Some 40% of unborn babies are at unnecessary risk of birth defects

Approximately 40% of the UK's pregnant women are too late in taking the essential nutrient folic acid during pregnancy to reduce the risk of neural tube defects such as spina bifida, according to a new report published by Folic Acid Action (FAA).

FAA, an expert panel of healthcare professionals and a patient organisation, is recommending daily 400mg folic acid supplementation for all women who are ovulating and sexually active. It also suggests that colleagues in the healthcare professions should routinely discuss and recommend folic acid supplementation with this key group of women, and is calling on the Government to revive the folic acid education campaign run by the now defunct Health Education Authority during 1996-99.

Comments Rosemary Batchelor, senior adviser of health and policy, The Association for Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus (ASBAH), which chaired the group: "Every year around 1,000 pregnancies are affected by spina bifida, the most common neural tube defect. In many cases the parents chose to terminate the pregnancy. Supplementation has proven benefits

in helping to reduce the incidence and, therefore, the enormous distress and trauma of a pregnancy affected by an NTD.

"Overall awareness about folic acid is quite good, but women and even health professionals are often not aware of the critical window for supplementation — one month's pre-conception and up to 12 weeks into pregnancy.

"This is compounded by around 50% of pregnancies being unplanned, only 28% of those planning a pregnancy take folic acid pre-conceptually and less than a third taking it in the first six weeks — the critical window."

"The majority of pregnancies are therefore not benefiting from the easy and inexpensive risk reduction offered by folic acid supplementation combined with a diet rich in fruit and vegetables," Batchelor warns.

Folic acid is a key nutrient in helping to prevent neural tube defects such as spina bifida, where the spine fails to develop properly and leaves the spinal cord exposed. It can lead to paralysis and, often, to an associated condition — hydrocephalus — where fluid builds up to dangerous levels in

the brain and must be drained to prevent damage. The neural tube forms during the first 28 days of pregnancy, which is why the Government recommends that all women planning a pregnancy should take a 400mg supplement daily alongside a diet rich in fruit and vegetables — offering around 200mg — to ensure the optimum intake of 600mg daily.

FAA reviewed new independent consumer research, commissioned by the manufacturers of Micro Folic Acid, Larkhall Laboratories. It concluded that greater education on the consequences of not taking folic acid at the optimal time would lead to better health outcomes. The main recommendation was that it is critical to communicate the consistent and sustainable message that folic acid can help to prevent up to 50% of birth defect cases provided it is taken pre-conceptually and during early pregnancy.

To see a full copy of the report at the FAA microsite: www.microfolicacid.com/faa. The latest research was carried out by IPSOS and surveyed (1195) of new mothers, pregnant women and women contemplating pregnancy aged 16-45.