

# Folic acid saves 1,300 babies each year from serious birth defects of brain and spine

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Fortifying grain foods with the B vitamin folic acid has saved about 1,300 babies every year from being born with serious birth defects of the brain and spine known as neural tube defects (NTDs), according to new data published by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in its publication *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* (MMWR). The number of babies born in the United States with these conditions has declined by 35 percent since 1998.

About 3,000 pregnancies in the U.S. still are affected by NTDs annually. The March of Dimes says that even with fortified grain products, many women still may not be getting enough folic acid. The organization urges all women to take vitamins containing folic acid, but only about one-third of women do.

"All women capable of having a baby should be taking a multivitamin containing folic acid every day," advises Siobhan M. Dolan, M.D., MPH, coauthor of the first March of Dimes book *Healthy Mom, Healthy Baby: The Ultimate Pregnancy Guide*. "It's also good to eat foods that contain folate, the natural form of folic acid, including lentils, green leafy vegetables, black beans, and orange juice, as well as foods fortified with folic acid, such as bread and pasta, and enriched cereals."

Since [folic acid fortification](#) went into effect in 1998, the percentage of babies born with NTDs declined by 35 percent, according to the CDC analysis in the paper "Updated Neural Tube Defect Prevalence Estimates after Mandatory Folic Acid Fortification - United States, 1995-2011," published in today's MMWR. A separate paper, "Supplement Use and Other Characteristics among Pregnant Women with a Previous Neural Tube Defect-Affected Pregnancy—United States, 1997-2009," also published today in the MMWR, found that among women who had a prior baby born with an NTD those who took high-dose folic acid (4

milligrams) with a subsequent pregnancy were less likely to have a baby with an NTD than those who did not take folic acid. The papers are available at <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr>

The authors urge women who had a previous pregnancy affected by an NTD to follow CDC recommendations to take high-dose folic acid beginning at least four weeks before becoming pregnant and continuing through the first trimester of pregnancy

Hispanic women continue to be about 20 percent more likely to have a child with an NTD than non-Hispanic white women, according to the new research. One reason may be that wheat flour is fortified with [folic acid](#), but corn masa flour, more popular among Hispanic [women](#), is not.

Provided by March of Dimes Foundation

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