



## News Release

For Immediate Release:  
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### **Folic Acid Emphasized For Birth Defects Prevention Month**

(Salt Lake City, Utah) - Each year in the United States about 4,000 pregnancies are affected by neural tube defects (NTDs), which are severe birth defects of the brain and spine. In Utah, out of more than 45,000 births (1999), about 40 babies with NTDs are born each year. Those born with spina bifida, the most common NTD, have lifelong physical challenges. January is National Birth Defects Prevention Month and the Utah Department of Health (UDOH) wants women of childbearing age and capable of becoming pregnant to take a multivitamin with folic acid — even if they are not planning to become pregnant.

Unlike other birth defects, much is known about how to prevent NTDs. By taking a multivitamin that contains folic acid (Vitamin B) at least one month before pregnancy, more than 50 percent of NTDs will be prevented. Folic acid in combination with consuming a healthy diet decreases the odds of having a child with a NTD. Eating the right foods can help increase folic acid levels because many foods naturally contain folic acid and others are enriched such as orange juice, spinach or other green leafy vegetables and legumes, breads and cereals.

However, it is not possible for women to consume the recommended 400 micrograms a day from diet alone. It would take eight glasses of orange juice a day to obtain the recommended amount for prevention. In 1998, the Food and Drug Administration required all grains to be fortified with folic acid, but this provides only 25 percent of the recommended amount of folic acid. That is why the UDOH and the March of Dimes recommend a daily multivitamin for all women of childbearing age regardless of pregnancy plans.

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The greatest prevention effort of folic acid occurs during the first couple of months of pregnancy — often before a woman knows that she is pregnant. To emphasize the importance of all women taking folic acid regardless of their intention to become pregnant, the UDOH points out that more than 50 percent of pregnancies are unplanned. Nationally, in 1998, only 29 percent of women who were not pregnant reported taking a daily multivitamin. Every woman is at risk for having a child with a NTD whether she has had a healthy baby with the first or a subsequent pregnancy.

Efforts to educate women about the importance of folic acid is taking place during Birth Defects Prevention Month and throughout public health all year long. This message is drastically needed to help educate women who do not understand the recommendation. A recent report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (MMWR, April 29, 1999) released the findings of a national study showing that only 13 percent of women studied knew that folic acid helps prevent birth defects; only 7 percent knew that it should be taken before pregnancy to prevent birth defects. After 28 days of pregnancy, without folic acid, the NTD has occurred.

This year, many of the 8,500 women in Utah who are enrolled in the Women, Infant and Children (WIC) federally funded nutrition program are currently being provided free multivitamins and discounts to purchase additional supplies. The free and reduced-cost vitamins are thanks to the Folic Acid Educational Campaign Committee, a grant from the March of Dimes, funding from the UDOH and Smith's Food and Drug.

For more information on how to prevent birth defects, ask your health care provider for prevention information prior to pregnancy or call the Utah Birth Defects Network at 583-9493 or 1-800-822-2229.

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