DON'T FORGET ABOUT YOUR FOLIC ACID

SAFEFOOD encourages sexually active women who could become pregnant to take folic acid daily

Safefood, supported by the HSE and partners Spinda Bifida Hydrocephalus Ireland, ran a campaign this summer highlighting the importance of taking a folic acid supplement daily aimed at sexually active women irrespective of whether they are planning a pregnancy or not.

Many women do not see folic acid as relevant because they are not planning a pregnancy, but research shows that half of pregnancies are unplanned.

Therefore, the campaign urged all women who could become pregnant to take a daily supplement whether or not they intend to become pregnant.

Women do not get enough folic acid from their food therefore taking a folic acid supplement daily is the best way to reduce the risk of having a baby with a Neural Tube Defect (NTD) like Spina Bifida.

HSE's National Dietetic Advisor, Margaret O' Neill says "All women need folic acid every day. However, women and teenagers who might become pregnant within the next year need an extra 400 micrograms folic acid as a supplement (tablet) every day.

"Taking a folic acid supplement at least three months before becoming pregnant and for the first three months of pregnancy can help a baby's spine and brain develop properly. We need to ensure we provide the best protection for baby's development by encouraging all women who are sexually active and who could become pregnant to take their folic acid daily. Start the folic habit!"

In the Republic of Ireland, 236 babies with a neural tube defect (NTD) were born between 2009 and 2011. On average, around 80 babies are born every year with a NTD – taking folic acid daily as a supplement could potentially prevent 70pc of those cases.

The campaign is now in its second year following positive results from year one, with 90pc of those that saw the campaign said 'they were thinking about taking folic' while 38pc said that they had started taking folic acid in the six weeks after the campaign.

Pharmacies, retailers and manufacturers reported on average an increased sales in Folic Acid by 26pc.

MORE INFORMATION

For more information on Folic Acid and creating that folic habit visit **www.safefood.eu/folicacid** or follow the conversation on twitter **#FolicFacts**

Submitted by the HSE's Healthy Eating and Active Living programme

TOP OF PAGE: (l-r) Tom Scott, Spina Bifda Hydrocephalus Ireland; Dr Rhona Mahony, National Maternity Hospital; Dr Cliodhna Foley-Nolan, safefood; Alison Canavan, Coombe Women and Infants University Hospital; Prof Michael Turner, UCD; Dr Aileen McGloin, safefood. PHOTO: ROBBIE REYNOLDS.

FOLIC ACID FACTS

WHAT IS FOLATE OR FOLIC ACID?

FOLATE is a B-group vitamin that is essential for good health. Folate is naturally present in many foods. A form of folate, called folic acid, is used in dietary supplements and added to foods to enrich them. These are known as fortified foods.

WHY IS FOLATE IMPORTANT?

OUR bodies need folate to make DNA and other genetic material. Folate is also needed for the body's cells to divide. Folate is especially important in unborn babies because it helps the nervous system develop. In the very first weeks of pregnancy, the neural tube closes and fuses. The neural tube later becomes the baby's brain and spinal cord.

WHAT IS A NEURAL TUBE DEFECT?

A NEURAL tube defect, also known as a NTD, is more likely if mothers don't have enough folate in their bodies before getting pregnant and during the early weeks of pregnancy. Spina bifida is one type of neural tube defect. Taking extra folic acid as a supplement before getting pregnant and through the early weeks of pregnancy may reduce the chance of a baby developing a NTD. Not all cases of NTDs can be prevented, but taking folic acid is very helpful for most pregnancies.

WHO NEEDS FOLIC ACID?

FOLATE cannot be stored in the body, so you need it in your diet every day. Women and teenagers who might become pregnant within the next year need an extra 400 micrograms folic acid as a supplement (tablet) every day as well as eating a healthy diet.