

[IMAGE]

## Preventing Birth Defects with Folic Acid

Few things can cast a more frightening shadow over the joy of childbirth than finding out that your child is afflicted with a birth defect such as anencephaly or spina bifida. Babies with anencephaly never develop a brain and are stillborn or die shortly after birth; those afflicted with spina bifida have a defect in the spinal column that can lead to paralysis and/or mental retardation.

Evidence suggests that folic acid can help prevent these two major birth defects, and a recent study in *The New England Journal of Medicine* echoes this hypothesis. As part of a public health campaign conducted in China, birth defects were evaluated among the fetuses or infants of women who took folic acid (at any time before or during pregnancy) compared with those whose mothers did not take folic acid. Results supported the protective effect of folic acid:

- Folic acid supplementation: 0.8 defects per 1,000 pregnancies;
- No folic acid supplementation: 2.9 defects per 1,000 pregnancies.

These results are especially important because, as the authors note, the baseline rate of defects in the southern region of China is similar to rates in the United States and other countries. If you're expecting the birth of a child, consult with your team of health care professionals on a comprehensive exercise and nutrition program that can help ensure a healthy, happy newborn.

### *Reference:*

Berry RJ, Zhu L, Erickson JD, et al. Prevention of neural tube defects with folic acid in China. *The New England Journal of Medicine*, Nov. 11, 1999; Vol. 341, No. 20, pp1485-90.

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