

Planning a pregnancy?

We all want our children to have the best start in life and to be healthy. So it is a good idea to think about some health issues even before you become pregnant.

Folic acid

Spina bifida affects about one in 500 babies. It is a defect in the baby's back that may result in damage to the spinal cord. The child may not be able to use his or her legs normally, or have normal control of bladder or bowel. The good news is that if you take extra folic acid, the risk of spina bifida is much less.

What is folic acid?

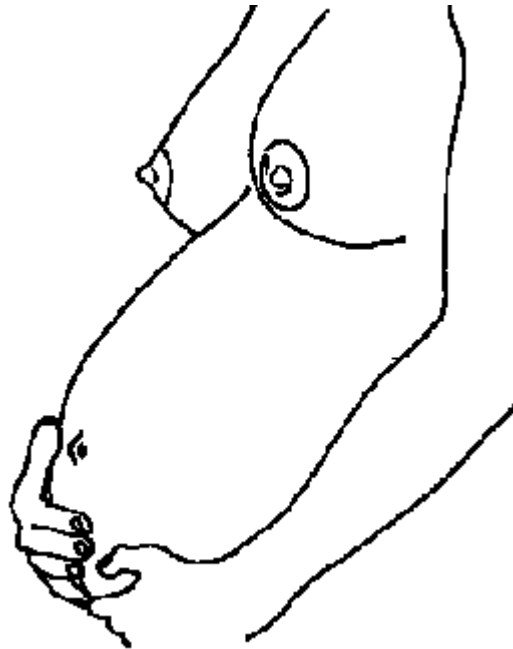
Folic acid is one of the B group vitamins. It is found in many foods, particularly fresh vegetables, fruit, nuts and liver. However, cooking can affect folic acid, and some people do not seem to get enough from their diet.

Doctors recommend folic acid tablets (one 0.5 mg tablet daily) before conceiving and for the first few months of pregnancy. They are cheap and available at any chemist or health food store. Some women may need more folic acid than others. They might have a higher risk of giving birth to a child with spina bifida or related problems.

If you are low in vitamin B12 or are taking medications for epilepsy, consult your doctor before taking any folic acid tablets.

Should I take other vitamin supplements?

Not necessarily. Large doses of vitamin A for example, may increase the risk of birth defects. Consult your doctor before taking vitamin supplements.



Are you safe from rubella?

Infection with the rubella virus (German measles) in the first eight to 10 weeks of pregnancy can result in severe problems for the baby. These include deafness, heart defects, eye defects and brain damage.

You can catch rubella without becoming sick or even knowing about it. Before you try to become pregnant, remember to ask your doctor for a blood test to check you are protected against rubella.

If you are not immune to rubella, you should have a rubella vaccine, and avoid becoming pregnant for another two months. Even if you think you have had rubella already, you should still check to see if you are immune.

How old are you?

Many women these days are postponing having a family until they are in their thirties and sometimes older. As you get older, you are more likely to have a baby with an abnormal chromo-

some(s).

Chromosomes are the blueprints for how we are made. One of the most common mistakes within a chromosome results in a child with Downs Syndrome.

Even if you already have normal children, it does not guarantee normal children as you get older. The chance of having a liveborn baby with a chromosome abnormality is around one in 200 when you are 35. It rises to one in 60 at the age of 40, and one in 20 at the age of 45.

Can I find out if my baby will be normal?

Even at the age of 45 there are 19 out of 20 chances that the baby is going to be perfectly normal. However, having certain tests can confirm this.

CVS

A chorionic villus biopsy (CVS) can be done at around 10 weeks of pregnancy. It checks if the baby has normal chromosomes. It is very like having a Pap

smear, is painless and can be done as an outpatient.

Amniocentesis

This test is available at 16 weeks of pregnancy. A doctor will collect fluid from around the baby. This fluid contains cells from the baby, which can be tested for genetic disorders.

Ultrasound

An ultrasound scan may also help to show whether your baby is growing normally. It gives a picture of the baby in the womb by using sound waves.

Your family history

Finding out about your family history is important. Do any of your aunts or uncles have children with cystic fibrosis? There are now easy mouthwash tests to see if you have the genetic abnormality for this condition.

One in every 30 people is a carrier of this abnormality. However, both parents must be carriers for there to be any risk of having a baby with cystic fibrosis.

Perhaps other things in your family history worry you, such as mental retardation or muscular dystrophy or haemophilia. Gene tests for all these disorders are now available.

Think about asking your doctor for information or ring your local genetic counsellor. Planning ahead can help ensure that at the end of the pregnancy you have a perfectly healthy baby.

This article was prepared with the assistance of the Hunter Genetics Unit.