Understanding Task Force Draft Recommendations

This fact sheet explains the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force’s (Task Force) draft recommendation statement on folic acid supplementation to prevent neural tube defects. It also tells you how you can send comments about the draft recommendation to the Task Force. Comments may be submitted from February 21, 2023, to March 20, 2023. The Task Force welcomes your comments.

Folic Acid Supplementation to Prevent Neural Tube Defects

The Task Force issued a draft recommendation statement on Folic Acid Supplementation to Prevent Neural Tube Defects.

The Task Force recommends taking folic acid supplements before and during early pregnancy to help prevent neural tube defects, which can cause serious complications for babies including disability and death.

This draft recommendation applies to people who are planning to or could become pregnant. It also applies to people in their first two to three months of pregnancy. It does not apply to people who have had a previous pregnancy affected by neural tube defects or who are at high risk for this condition due to other factors like family history or taking anti-seizure medications. Healthcare professionals may have different guidance for these specific groups.

Facts About Neural Tube Defects

Neural tube defects are among the most common birth defects in the United States. They occur when the neural tube, which forms the brain and spine, does not develop properly. It can result in death or a range of disabilities from problems with the brain and spinal cord’s development. The most common forms of neural tube defects are anencephaly (when the baby’s brain is underdeveloped and the skull is incomplete), encephalocele (when part of the baby’s brain pushes through the skull), and spina bifida (when the spine does not completely close).

Neural tube defects occur early in pregnancy, often before a person knows that they are pregnant. While all pregnancies are at risk for neural tube defects, there are certain factors that can increase risk. This includes having a family history of neural tube defects, having difficulties absorbing the nutrients from food because of weight loss surgery, having diabetes or obesity, and taking certain anti-seizure medications. Additionally, Hispanic and Latina people are at increased risk of developing neural tube defects. It is unclear whether this risk is related to genetics or due to food preferences.

Facts About Folic Acid

While folate – the natural form of folic acid – is found in a variety of foods, and folic acid is added to some food, many people still do not get enough of it in their diets.

The best time to start taking folic acid is at least one month before pregnancy and continuing through the first two to three months of pregnancy.

What is folic acid?
The form of the vitamin folate that is added to some foods and also found in multivitamins, prenatal vitamins, and folic acid tablets.

What are neural tube defects?
When the brain or spinal cord do not develop properly in a baby. This is often caused by low levels of folate in the body.
Potential Benefits and Harms of Folic Acid Supplementation to Prevent Neural Tube Defects

The Task Force found that taking folic acid helps prevent neural tube birth defects. To get this benefit, people should take folic acid before and during early pregnancy. There are not any serious harms associated with taking the suggested dose of folic acid.

The Draft Recommendation on Folic Acid Supplementation to Prevent Neural Tube Defects: What Does It Mean?

Here is the Task Force’s draft recommendation on folic acid supplementation to prevent neural tube defects. It is based on the quality and strength of the evidence about the potential benefits and harms of medication for this purpose. It is also based on the size of the potential benefits and harms. Task Force recommendation grades are explained in the box at the end of this fact sheet.

When the Task Force issues an A Grade, it recommends a preventive medication because it has more potential benefits than potential harms.

Before you send comments to the Task Force, you may want to read the draft recommendation statement. The recommendation statement explains the evidence the Task Force reviewed and how it decided on the grade. An evidence document provides more detail about the scientific studies the Task Force reviewed.

Notes

1. The USPSTF recommends that all persons planning to or who could become pregnant take a daily supplement containing 0.4 to 0.8 mg (400 to 800 mcg) of folic acid. A Grade

2. folic acid
The form of folate that is added to some foods and also found in multivitamins, prenatal vitamins, and folic acid tablets.
What is the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force?

The Task Force is an independent, non-federal, volunteer group of national experts in prevention and evidence-based medicine. The Task Force works to improve the health of people nationwide by making evidence-based recommendations about clinical preventive services, such as screenings, counseling services, and preventive medicines. The recommendations apply to people with no signs or symptoms of the disease being discussed.

To develop a recommendation statement, Task Force members consider the best available science and research on a topic. For each topic, the Task Force posts draft documents for public comment, including a draft recommendation statement. All comments are reviewed and considered in developing the final recommendation statement. To learn more, visit the Task Force website.

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<th>Grade</th>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Recommended.</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Recommended.</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Recommendation depends on the patient’s situation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Not recommended.</td>
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<td>I statement</td>
<td>There is not enough evidence to make a recommendation.</td>
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Click Here to Learn More About Folic Acid and Neural Tube Defects

- Folic Acid (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
- Folic Acid (MedlinePlus)
- About Neural Tube Defects (NTDs) (National Institutes of Health)

Click Here to Comment on the Draft Recommendation

The Task Force welcomes comments on this draft recommendation.
Comments must be received between February 21, 2023, and March 20, 2023.
All comments will be considered for use in writing final recommendations.

Comment Period from February 21, 2023 to March 20, 2023