

North Carolina Hispanic women do not take multivitamins despite increased risk of serious birth defects
Statewide study aims to understand Hispanic women's beliefs and behaviors about multivitamins and folic acid

Raleigh, NC (June 4, 2009) – A recent statewide study conducted by the North Carolina Folic Acid Campaign and published by the *American Journal of Health Education* revealed that only one-third of Hispanic women took a daily multivitamin with folic acid. These findings are important because Hispanics have a significantly higher risk of having a baby affected by a birth defect of the brain (anencephaly) or spine (spina bifida). According to public health experts, all women of childbearing age should take a daily multivitamin with folic acid, to reduce their risk of having a baby with these birth defects. This recommendation is especially important for Hispanics because their risk is **double** that of non-Hispanic whites and blacks.

As part of the study, in 2006, the North Carolina Folic Acid Campaign administered a survey to foreign-born Hispanic women ages 18-35 in 12 randomly selected counties throughout the state. The study results confirm that Hispanic women in North Carolina lack awareness about the importance of multivitamins and folic acid. Less than one-quarter of the respondents knew that multivitamins or folic acid should be taken *before* pregnancy and only 20 percent knew that folic acid was good for the development of the brain and spine of fetuses.

Established research shows that up to 70 percent of birth defects of the brain and spine, known as neural tube defects (NTD), may be prevented with adequate folic acid intake before and during the early weeks of pregnancy. Folic acid is a water-soluble B vitamin found in multivitamins and fortified foods.

The survey also found several myths about multivitamins in the Hispanic community. Hispanic women believe that multivitamins are expensive, are only needed for pregnant women, and can cause weight gain and/or increase their appetite. These myths can create significant barriers and challenges for Hispanic women in starting a daily multivitamin habit. Furthermore, these barriers may contribute to the low vitamin consumption among Hispanic women in North Carolina. In reality, vitamins are inexpensive and only cost pennies a day. It is also clear that women need to take a daily multivitamin regardless of their pregnancy intentions. Currently no research exists to prove or disprove the belief about weight gain and/or increased appetite from a multivitamin.

Although this study confirmed earlier findings regarding multivitamin knowledge and behaviors, it was unique because it offered insights into a population that is rarely surveyed in such a

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comprehensive way. The combination of an anonymous face-to-face survey in Spanish and the use of native Spanish-speaking data collectors produced a high level of participant comfort with the survey, thereby allowing the North Carolina Folic Acid Campaign to survey approximately one percent of the total population of Spanish-speaking foreign-born women 18-35 in North Carolina.

This study also highlighted the important role of health care providers in educating Hispanic women about multivitamins, folic acid and birth defects. Ninety-nine percent of respondents who did not take a daily multivitamin reported that they would do so upon the recommendation of their health care providers (vs. 88 percent of all women of childbearing age nationally).

“This is good news for the health care community. Health care providers play a critical role in increasing knowledge and influencing behavior to increase the consumption of multivitamins among Hispanic women,” said Leslie deRosset, MPH, Latino Campaign Coordinator and lead author of the study. “They should be prepared at every available opportunity to counsel women about their risk and the potential benefits of preconceptional folic acid consumption.”

The article, “Multivitamins, Folic Acid and Birth Defects: Knowledge, Beliefs and Behaviors of Hispanic Women in North Carolina,” was published in the May/June issue of the *American Journal of Health Education*. This is the first time the NC Folic Acid Campaign has been published in a peer-reviewed publication.

For more information about the results of this study, please contact Leslie deRosset, MPH, at 919-424-2149 or lderosset@marchofdimes.com. The North Carolina Folic Acid Campaign is a collaboration between the North Carolina Folic Acid Council and the March of Dimes. Membership in our Council is free. Visit www.getfolic.com for more information.

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About the North Carolina Folic Acid Campaign

The North Carolina Folic Acid Campaign is a statewide program whose mission is to improve health by promoting the benefits and consumption of folic acid by taking a daily multivitamin. Established in 1994, the program advocates that all women of child bearing age take 400 mcg of folic acid daily to help prevent neural tube defects (NTDs). Through its collaboration and partnership, the March of Dimes and the North Carolina Folic Acid Council have made significant progress in the campaign to reduce NTDs. To learn more, visit www.getfolic.com and www.marchofdimes.com.

About the March of Dimes

The March of Dimes is the leading nonprofit organization for pregnancy and baby health. With chapters nationwide and its premier event, March for Babies, the March of Dimes works to improve the health of babies. For the latest resources and information, visit marchofdimes.com or nacersano.org.