

Low-income women will receive free multivitamins with folic acid **A new statewide multivitamin distribution program aims to reduce birth defects**

Raleigh, NC (May 25, 2010) – A bill passed by the NC General Assembly provides funding for the statewide distribution of multivitamins with folic acid to low income, non-pregnant women of childbearing age through health departments and other safety net providers. North Carolina is now the fifth state to have a statewide multivitamin program of this nature.

Studies show that if all women consumed the recommended amount of folic acid *before* and during early pregnancy, up to 70 percent of all neural tube defects could be prevented. Neural tube defects (NTDs) are serious birth defects, including spina bifida and anencephaly, that occur before most women even know that they are pregnant. These birth defects can result in physical abnormalities that can vary from minor to fatal. NTDs are common birth defects that occur in about 200 pregnancies each year in North Carolina.

This statewide multivitamin distribution program specifies that any low income, non-pregnant woman of childbearing age is eligible to receive a year's supply of multivitamins with folic acid from a participating health agency at no cost. Participants do not need to register with the agency to receive vitamins. These women must also receive one-on-one folic acid counseling and educational materials in order to take home their multivitamins.

Free multivitamins may be available at health departments' clinical settings such as Primary Care, Family Planning, STI, home visits, WIC, and health fairs, as well as at the Pharmacy or front desk. Other safety-net providers such as community health centers, rural health centers and migrant health centers will also distribute free multivitamins. Over 190 agencies throughout the state have signed up for the program, including all health departments.

The vitamins distributed by this program are basic daily multivitamins that contain 100 percent daily value of vitamins A, C, D, B1, B2, B6, niacin, folic acid, and B12. They are not prenatal vitamins and are not intended for pregnant women. The vitamins do not contain any minerals, which makes the pills smaller and easier to tolerate.

The North Carolina Folic Acid Campaign is providing training and technical assistance to agencies who wish to participate in the program. The campaign is using its existing regional coordination model to reach out to health care providers who are most likely to influence the health decisions of women of childbearing age. The Campaign is also offering an online training module to prepare them for the program.

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A multivitamin distribution pilot program in western North Carolina showed folic acid education provided to those distributing multivitamins and those receiving multivitamins is essential to program success. With the help of the Mission Healthcare Foundation, 24 western North Carolina counties have participated in a pilot program to distribute low-cost multivitamins to women of childbearing age since 2003. The results of the program evaluation showed that 53 percent of women in the program take a daily multivitamin, compared to 25 percent before the intervention. The most dramatic change in behavior was among Hispanic women, who have a higher risk of having an NTD-affected pregnancy than other races/ethnicities.

Although our NTD rates have dropped in North Carolina, the financial cost of spina bifida to taxpayers continues to be high. A statewide multivitamin distribution program for low-income women, in conjunction with an existing public health education campaign, could decrease North Carolina's NTD rate even more while producing a sustained cost savings to Medicaid over time. In a recent analysis of Medicaid claims during the first year of life for children with spina bifida, the NC State Center for Health Statistics found that Medicaid expenses for children with spina bifida are more than 12 times greater than the average (median) cost for all Medicaid live births. Between 2001 and 2005, \$4,365,000 of Medicaid claims were paid in North Carolina for infants with spina bifida (through age 1). The average Medicaid cost per year was \$873,000 for the care of these infants during those years.

Thanks to the advocacy efforts of the March of Dimes and its volunteers, low-income women will now have access to a vitamin that saves lives. Providing a free, one-year supply of vitamins simultaneously with face-to-face health care provider counseling may be the ideal tool to move individuals from knowledge to action and allow women to change their behavior immediately.

For more information about the program, please contact Megan Fazekas, at 919-424-2151 or mfazekas@marchofdimes.com. The North Carolina Folic Acid Campaign, a collaboration between the March of Dimes and the North Carolina Folic Acid Council, uses innovative initiatives to educate women about the benefits of folic acid and the birth defects it helps to prevent. The statewide program's 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 birth defects of the brain and spine, called neural tube defects (NTDs). Membership in our Council is free. Visit 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 BabiesSM, the March of Dimes works to improve the health of babies by preventing birth defects, premature birth, and infant mortality. For the latest resources and information, visit marchofdimes.com or nacersano.org.