

Dear Public Health Partner,

Over the past few years, we have made great strides in spreading the word that folic acid can help prevent certain birth defects - yet research shows that many, many women still are not getting enough of this important B vitamin.

That's why more than 20 of the nation's leading organizations with a common interest in preventing birth defects have come together to form the National Council on Folic Acid (The Council). The Council's mission is to reduce birth defects by promoting the use of folic acid, and its goal is to increase the number of women who consume the recommended 0.4 mg (400 mcg) of folic acid daily.

In the past year, the Council conducted extensive research with consumers and health professionals to develop a social marketing campaign directed to consumers that could be successfully implemented by Council members and their affiliates. Research done in 1998 by the March of Dimes revealed that only 29 percent of women age 18-45 who are not currently pregnant take a multivitamin containing folic acid. Also, focus group research conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) revealed that while a growing number of women know that folic acid can help prevent birth defects, most are unaware that it must be taken **prior** to conception in order to have a full preventive effect.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has compiled a community resource guide on folic acid, "*Preventing Neural Tube Birth Defects: A Prevention Model and Resource Guide*" which contains useful information to help you plan and conduct health education and interventions in your communities. This guide can be ordered by calling 770-488-7190 or is available on the web at [www.cdc.gov/nceh/prevent/flo](http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/prevent/flo).

An effort of this magnitude requires a number of components; this media campaign is only one of them. The Council is conducting educational campaigns for health care providers; pursuing community education efforts; and working to increase the levels of food fortification. One of our biggest strategies, however, is to execute a nationwide mass media campaign. That's where you get involved.

While we will be implementing our media campaign on a national level, its success is dependent upon local involvement and action. This kit will help local partners implement the media aspect of the campaign, providing materials and guidance on placing public service and news stories for local media. The kit includes the following:

- Background on the Campaign
- A Guide to Working With the News Media
- A Guide to Placement of Public Service Materials
- News Media Materials (for local customization)

These materials and further information on the campaign and the Council, can also be found on the CDC web site listed above. If you have any questions about the media campaign or birth defect prevention, please call CDC's toll-free number (1-888-232-6789) or March of Dimes toll-free number (1-888-MODIMES).

Thank you for helping us spread this important message: **Take Folic Acid Now To Prevent Birth Defects.**



## **I. Background on the Campaign**

### ***Introduction***

The National Folic Acid Campaign is a collaborative effort of organizations that belong to the National Council on Folic Acid (The Council), a coalition led by the March of Dimes. This group includes government agencies, non-profit organizations, health professional associations and community health coalitions - all sharing a common interest in reducing birth defects through increased folic acid intake.

The mission of the Council is to reduce birth defects by promoting the use of folic acid. The goal is to increase the proportion of women who consume 0.4 milligrams (400 micrograms) of folic acid daily, in accordance with the 1992 U.S. Public Health Service (PHS) recommendation. The Council has identified three main strategies to accomplish this goal:

- Increase the proportion of women who understand that consuming folic acid daily can help prevent birth defects.
- Make folic acid awareness a routine and standard part of the delivery of preventive health care services to women.
- Increase the level and availability of folic acid in food.

With the goal of promoting consistent messages about the use of folic acid directly to women, the Council has developed a multi-phased social marketing campaign using mass media that is being launched this year. Social marketing combines a detailed situation analysis with extensive audience research involving who they are, what they know, think, and do. The goal is positive behavior change, in this case, taking folic acid every day. Throughout the campaign, members will evaluate the effectiveness of folic acid projects and programs and share lessons learned.

### ***Situation***

Many professionals in this area of public health are aware of the basic facts: In 1992, the PHS recommended that all women of childbearing age who are capable of becoming pregnant should consume 0.4 mg (400 mcg) of the B vitamin folic acid per day. This followed conclusive scientific evidence that if all women consumed this amount of folic acid it would reduce the frequency of neural tube defects between 50 and 70 percent. The outcome would be the prevention of neural tube defects in many of the 4,000 pregnancies affected each year.

Neural tube defects (NTDs) are common, serious birth defects that affect the spine (spina bifida) and brain (anencephaly). While 1 out of every 1,000 pregnancies in the United States is affected, public knowledge about NTDs and about folic acid is still limited. In the five years since the PHS recommendations, more than 10,000 babies have been born with NTDs.

Through the efforts of many organizations, awareness of folic acid among women of childbearing age has risen somewhat – from 52 percent in 1995 to 66 percent in 1998 – but

consumption of folic acid has lagged behind awareness. In the same year, only 1 in 4 women reported consuming the recommended daily amount of that vitamin.

### ***A Social Marketing Approach***

With the goal of changing this behavior, focus group research was conducted with women carefully divided into distinct ‘segments.’ These audience segments were defined by demographic factors such as age, income and education. However, simply dividing women into groups based on their “statistics” alone is not enough. Our strategies must pay attention to psychographic factors – personal attitudes, perceptions and beliefs – that influence all behaviors.

At different times in our lives, we are all in different stages of “readiness to change.” In times of transition, we are more open to new messages and new beliefs; in times of stasis, we are more resistant. In any campaign seeking to influence behavior, it is important to recognize where your target audience is, and how best to move them along to the next stage.

For instance, two women who share similar economic and cultural background may respond very differently to folic acid messages if one of them is married and planning a family, and the other is single and determined to stay that way. The woman planning a pregnancy is much more open to messages about behavior change – she is contemplating some serious life choices, and she is prepared to make appropriate adjustments in her behavior and beliefs. The single woman, however, is not planning to make serious alterations in her life anytime soon, and is more resistant to an outside influence. A folic acid campaign may be able to convince the first woman to go to her drugstore, buy a supplement, and start taking it daily. For the single woman in our example, the first step may be just to get her to start *thinking* about the idea of folic acid.

### ***A Research-Driven Campaign***

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention spearheaded a series of consumer research efforts to determine who is the primary target audience, to understand the target audience, and to develop meaningful messages and products as appropriate. This research was intended to uncover the needs, values and motivating factors of women who might become pregnant and should be taking folic acid. This included three different levels of research:

- *Formative Research*, among women who might get pregnant, and among doctors, nurses, and nutritionists. Through a series of focus groups conducted across the country, we interviewed women on their nutritional habits and beliefs; their attitudes towards pregnancy, birth defects, and folic acid; we probed the greatest barriers and – potentially – possible motivators for convincing women to take folic acid. We interviewed Spanish-speaking as well as English-speaking women, women who are planning pregnancy and women who are not planning pregnancy. Based on this formative research, we identified two separate audiences: women who are planning to get pregnant and are open to messages about pregnancy (“contemplators”), and women who are not planning to get pregnant and are more resistant to pregnancy messages (“pre-contemplators”).

- *Concept Research*, the second step in our research process, showed a series of possible creative concepts to the contemplators and the pre-contemplators. In a series of focus groups women responded to a variety of ideas that might or might not motivate them to take folic acid. The two strongest concepts – one for each audience - were selected to become creative campaigns.
- *Creative Pre-Test*. Finally, before producing any materials, there was a series of pre-tests with both the contemplators and pre-contemplators. In a series of one-on-one interviews, women saw some possible TV and print executions, to ensure that the key strategic message was effectively communicated in all spots.

### ***Target audience #1: Pregnancy Contemplators***

The Council has identified the “contemplators” as our target audience for the first messages of the folic acid campaign. Focus group research has shown that women who are planning a pregnancy are most receptive to the folic acid message and therefore are most likely to respond to our campaign efforts. Based on data collected via the national HealthStyles survey and through focus group research, we profiled this target audience as follows:

- Between 18-35 years old
- Thinking about or planning to become pregnant in the next year or the near future
- Probably married, may already have children
- Tend to live in non-urban environment
- Middle-income families

To address this audience effectively, the CDC tested many folic acid messages to determine which concepts were the most relevant and motivating. Because of their attitude toward pregnancy, the contemplators were “ready to change” and were very receptive to messages about folic acid. While their overall awareness of folic acid was high, some critical knowledge gaps were identified: many still did not know that folic acid can prevent birth defects, and even more were unaware that it must be taken **before** pregnancy in order to have a full preventive effect. With this audience, that last fact is absolutely key, and forms the central platform of the campaign.

A second campaign, yet to be produced, will be directed toward the second target audience, the “pre-contemplators” – women who are not currently thinking about or planning a pregnancy. These women are more resistant to pregnancy-related messages, and will be harder to inform. However, since nearly half of all pregnancies are unplanned, this group cannot be overlooked. You will be provided with the materials necessary to reach this challenging audience as soon as they are available (estimated mid-late 1999).

## *Objectives and Messages*

The objective of the media campaign is to increase the number of women who know that folic acid can help prevent birth defects, and specifically, to increase the number who know that it must be taken **before** pregnancy. The ultimate objective of the campaign, of course, is to increase the number of women of childbearing age who get 0.4 mg (400 mcg) of synthetic folic acid daily.

The main message point is: **“Take Folic Acid Now, BEFORE You Are Pregnant.”**

In addition, there are supplemental messages that are also important to convey. Research found that many women are confused about how to get enough folic acid, and many mistakenly believe that they are already getting enough. Therefore, communications include points on how to get the recommended amount of folic acid - by taking a daily multivitamin and choosing foods that are fortified with folic acid as part of a healthy diet.

## *The Media Campaign*

Mass media – national television, radio, print and public relations efforts – is the best way to reach the most people quickly. It represents an integral part of the efforts of the public education campaign.

## **March of Dimes First Quarter PSA**

For the first quarter launch of the campaign, the March of Dimes has developed a range of broadcast and print public service advertisements in English and Spanish. These are being distributed by the March of Dimes local chapters now as part of its multi-year folic acid campaign.

## **“Before You Know It” PSA and Support Materials**

These materials are for use, beginning in May 1999. You may want to begin now to plan to launch your campaign around Mother’s Day. Using the theme **“Before You Know It”**, the CDC has created a range of mass media and support materials in English and Spanish which Council members can use to get the folic acid message to the audience. Consumer research proved this theme to be highly motivating and strategically on-target, conveying clearly the message that women should take folic acid **before** they are pregnant. The central theme “Before You Know It,” along with a series of supporting messages, are conveyed in a number of products designed and developed for the campaign. Many of these materials are provided in this kit for your use, including:

- News release and News alert (for local customization)
- Fact sheet
- PSA pitch letters to accompany PSAs and News releases (for local customization)

While mass media is an effective strategy, it is important to remember that traditional health education methods and community outreach are also needed in order to accomplish the overall goals of the Council. In addition to its public education strategy, Council members are also involved in health care education efforts and have created campaign posters and brochures that can be used in these settings. A sample of each is included in this kit.

### ***Accessing the Power of the Media***

The March of Dimes and CDC have developed campaign materials for many different types of media. In your area, you will probably be dealing with local TV and radio stations and newspapers; it is important to remember the fundamental differences between these media in order to be most effective when working with them.

- By targeting specific sections of a newspaper with appropriate stories and ideas, you can get in-depth coverage of your issue. Community or weekly newspapers tend to highlight stories such as a folic acid awareness campaign.
- Radio and TV stations have more finite resources and ‘time’ for local news - usually 5 minutes for radio and half an hour for local TV news. Local talk shows on TV and radio, however, offer more comprehensive coverage and are also good targets.

Regardless of the format, reporters, producers and editors share one common trait - they want to bring important news to their local readers, viewers, and listeners. Therefore, a local story is always a plus. While the national campaign is the umbrella for your story, be sure to tell the media why this issue is important *in your area* and use local resources to help tell the story when possible.

When asking the media to use a public service announcement, remember that although most media still honor their community service commitment, they receive *lots* of requests. While you may find that smaller stations and newspapers are more approachable, personal contact with all media is the best way to get their attention and convince them to use your material.

Finally, when selecting which media outlet you will approach, consider the audience. This will help you prioritize your efforts and get the most effective results. For example, women of reproductive age are often readers of women’s magazines; the Council will be approaching national women’s magazines, so you may want to think about any regional or local magazines that address women’s interests.

The next two sections of this kit provide further guidance and advice on working with the news media and placing public service materials. If you have experience in these areas, we hope that it will provide a ‘refresher’ course for you. If you are not experienced, we hope that it will give you the basic knowledge and tools to conduct media outreach. Regardless, you already have something that a media pro will tell you is one of the most important assets: a belief in your cause.

## II. A Guide to Working With the News Media

The news media are a powerful conduit to help you draw attention to the goal of promoting folic acid to reduce birth defects. The media are in a unique position to communicate specific messages to your target audience, such as the need to take folic acid before getting pregnant. Getting publicity will add to the success of your program and increase recognition of your organization as a sponsor of this information.

Publicity can also extend the effect of your activities beyond the program. A special event, such as a folic acid awareness day or other local community programs, can be preceded and followed by publicity on radio and television stations, and in the local newspapers. Media coverage of promotional activities not only encourages participation, but also gets your message out to more people than might be reached in person by such activities.

If you have media relations experience, you already know how to effectively communicate your message through the news media. If you have not worked much with the media, there may be someone else in your organization with experience. If possible, find and work with that person. Here are some guidelines that can help you to establish contacts and obtain coverage.

### *What Makes News?*

The secret to gaining publicity is to understand the news media and ‘what makes news.’ Once you have a basic appreciation of the needs of the news media, you can then use a variety of story angles - or “news hooks” - to interest your media contacts in a story about folic acid.

Working with the media is a bit like social marketing - you have to first understand them in order to develop messages to which they will be most receptive. The good news is that, since we are exposed to “news” every day as consumers, most of us already have a basic understanding of the news media. Don’t downplay this experience. Think about what you already watch, listen to, and read for local news and information. You will note some basic facts about local media and how they deliver news to their constituents:

- **Newspapers** may be published daily or weekly. They are the primary deliverers of in-depth news in communities and cover many local events, together with the local perspective on national news or issues. The weekly papers tend to be less dominated by “breaking news” due to their time frame and offer more “feature” information. Daily papers also run features, usually on specific days of the week, such as a mid-week health section.
- **TV stations** usually allot 1/2 to 1 hour for local news programming, several times during the day. Given these daily airings and the visual nature of the medium, they concentrate on breaking news supported by video footage and reports gathered by mobile crews. With the exception of some local cable, these stations cater to universal interests, and thus reach a broad audience.
- **Radio stations**, which proliferate on the local level, are the most diverse in terms of programming formats, catering to specific audiences with different types of music, sports, or

talk shows. Their news coverage, with the exception of ‘all news’ formats, may be only 1 to 2 minutes at the top of each hour. However, radio plays an important role in serving local interests.

This review highlights two important factors that relate to all news media formats, and are important to remember when working with the news media:

**Frequency and Deadlines** – The frequency with which a particular news medium is aired (hourly, daily, weekly, or even monthly) has a direct impact on the type of news that is communicated. It also has a practical bearing on the deadlines. Daily media have daily deadlines; for instance, a newspaper reporter must finish a story by the afternoon before it is printed in the next day’s edition. Therefore, if you want to contact a daily reporter about a potential story, it is best to call in the morning. To assist in coordinating stories with pressing deadlines, many newspapers and TV stations have ‘assignment’ editors on their ‘news desks’ who basically take incoming stories and assign them to appropriate reporters. While it is usually best to try and talk to reporters who you know have an interest in your story, you may also contact assignment editors when you have a specific event happening on a specific day.

**Different Stories for Different ‘Beats’** – Most news organizations, depending on their size, have a variety of different departments. These are usually divided into two basic categories: news and features. By definition, news is something ‘new’ but it is also information of interest to a particular audience. By using the term ‘news’ versus ‘features’, we distinguish between the type of news: such as breaking facts and important events versus human interest stories. When watching the local news or reading the paper, think about how the ‘harder’ news is usually covered up front and is followed by ‘softer’ news features.

Further Segmenting Your Approach: Within each area you may find a number of different ‘beats’, or areas of interest, that might apply to the folic acid campaign. For instance, a newspaper’s features department might include beats such as women’s interest, or health news, each of which could potentially be a folic acid story. By tapping into these specific areas of interest, you can tailor your story in different ways. Many newspapers list their different departments, and some even give contact names and numbers for different beat editors or reporters. Most news desks at TV or radio stations can also refer you to appropriate personnel if you ask for someone working in the areas of ‘health news’ or ‘women’s interest’.

### ***Story Angles***

Understanding the media is the first step to gaining coverage; the second is to develop and select your story angles or ‘news hooks’ to attract attention and interest. Here are some examples:

- ***Most women don’t know to take folic acid before they are pregnant.*** This research-based fact presents a ‘hard news’ opportunity to get the main message of your campaign across. This angle is used in the attached press release. You can use this press release as a starting point, and can tailor it specifically for your own community.

- ***Community event focusing on folic acid.*** Promotional events such as health fairs, awareness days, seminars, fundraising activities, and pregnancy planning clinics, can be promoted through the media. It helps to have a visual element to the story – something interesting to show on television.

There are many other story topics you could use to help interest a specific news media, depending on your own organization’s priorities. Some of these might include:

- Vitamins – a piece on the importance of consuming a synthetic supplement in addition to a healthy diet; suggestions to help the reader get enough folic acid everyday through food.
- Planning for Pregnancy: Before You Get Pregnant - what you should know and do if you are planning a pregnancy – a broader story of interest to women’s pages.
- Seasonal stories: designate a “Moms To Be” Day after Mother’s Day. Or a winter story - many babies are conceived during the long, cold winter months.
- Profile of a person/family affected by spina bifida or another type of NTD.

### ***Materials for News Media***

This kit contains some local media materials that you can customize and use with your local media.

- The ***press release*** is a general news release that you can send to a variety of media and news contacts. Its basic story angle is that ‘most women do not know that folic acid must be taken before pregnancy in order to prevent birth defects’. Based on facts derived from research, the release is very similar to the national news release that the Council will be using to launch the first wave of the campaign, but contains sections where you can insert special information for your local media. Press releases that are mailed are generally accompanied by a cover letter. This isn’t strictly necessary but you can use the letter to “pitch” the story to the news reporter, explaining why it is important and should be covered.
- A sample ***news alert*** to promote a special event is attached for your reference. This news alert can be used by assignment and calendar section editors. When promoting an event, use this format to highlight the information most relevant to the media: in a nutshell, the who, what, when, where and why of your activity.
- For background purposes, a ***fact sheet*** on folic acid gives basic information regarding folic acid, pregnancy and birth defects. This may accompany the press release, and could also provide general background for the media along with any story angle.

### ***Your Media Strategy***

Once you have developed your angles and media materials, you are ready to approach the media. You don’t have to do everything, but here’s what a full media strategy might look like:

## 1. Meet with partners

There are other organizations in your area that share your mission and objectives. They may already be forming local folic acid councils and it might be helpful to meet with these organizations at the outset of a campaign, to pool resources and share responsibilities.

## 2. Assemble your media list

Depending on the story angle you are using, begin by compiling a list of specific reporters and editors who are most likely to be interested in your materials. You are much more likely to get a positive response if you personalize the information, rather than sending it generically to “editor” or “producer” or “health reporter”. To find out the names of contacts for your local media outlets, you can check media directories, which are available at libraries. However, positions at media outlets change frequently, so you may want to call and make sure the contact name you received from the directory is still current.

## 3. Package and mail your materials

This seems simple; just a matter of mailing labels, copying, collating and stuffing materials and posting. However, in addition to making sure you personalize the letter to the recipient, you should also make sure that the sender is identified on the exterior of the envelope. Reporters and editors get lots of press releases every day, and a recognized, credible source may prompt them to open your package rather than just put it aside.

Sometimes you might want to get your materials out immediately – if, for example, you are sending out a news alert the day before an event. In this case, you would want to fax materials to your contacts. You’ll need fax numbers and cover sheets - making sure that the cover sheet contains the sender’s identification. It’s okay to fax, or even to e-mail certain reporters (some advertise their email addresses in their columns or reports) but generally speaking, unless the information is urgent, the regular mail will do.

## 4. Call to follow up

Regardless of how you send your materials, the most critical factor in getting the media to run your story is personal follow-up - by phone or with a personal appointment. Follow up via the telephone is not only important in determining that they have received your materials, but it is also your key opportunity to encourage them to review the materials and run a story.

Before you begin calling, prepare a ‘pitch’ script for yourself - something short and to the point - and practice your pitch a few times on friends. Here’s an example of an opening statement:

*Hello, I am \_\_\_\_\_ with \_\_\_\_\_. I am calling to share some information about the B vitamin folic acid that can be very important for your readers (or viewers or listeners.) You may know that taking folic acid every day can help reduce birth defects. I frequently read (or watch or listen to) your column (or program) and I thought you might be interested in doing a*

*story on.... (follow with your story angle, for instance, ...the fact that you have to take it before you get pregnant).*

Your objective is to get their attention and present your story angle, but also to use the call as a starting point for a discussion about the topic. If they say that they have not received the material, offer to fax them the news release and put another package in the mail. Then call them back to confirm receipt and offer your pitch.

During follow up, apply common sense telephone etiquette, but try to take the time to explain the importance of the issue and the relevance of the story to the local public. Also find out if they have any questions or need more information. Ultimately, you are seeking to develop a relationship with the reporter or editor, one that will increase the likelihood that the story will be presented accurately and consistently to the public. Having relationships with the media will also come in handy when you have news or events in the future.

If you have to prioritize your media list for follow up, remember that daily newspapers are the leading news gathering force in a community. They tend to have more “specialized” editors and reporters and are naturally more likely to have the resources to cover your story. Also, radio and television contacts will often follow a newspaper’s lead in reporting news, so that if you get a story in the paper it will help generate broadcast interest. Following up first with editors and reporters at the daily local newspaper is a good start.

Whenever possible, arrange to meet face to face with reporters, editors and producers. Bring your materials that you want them to use. If you are asking them to cover an event, provide written background information.

Finally, if a story does appear, don’t forget to send a short note of thanks. Remember, you are trying to build a long-term relationship with reporters, not just get one story.

Additional sample pitch script scenarios for news media (and public service) are included in this kit.

### ***Interviews and Spokespersons***

Personal follow up also gives you the opportunity to establish yourself and your organization as reliable sources of information. If you can serve as a spokesperson on the issue, be sure to offer yourself as an expert on specific issues (folic acid, pregnancy, birth defects) who can be called on in the future. If you are not a recognized expert, you may want to identify a local spokesperson for the campaign prior to follow up in order to offer an interview with that person. Be sure to include the spokesperson’s credentials in the materials that you send.

Having a spokesperson will help you maximize your publicity coverage. Talk shows, call-in shows, and public affairs programs all provide publicity opportunities, often in the form of interviews. Newspaper reporters and editors often want a local spokesperson that they can directly quote in their stories. TV reporters and radio DJs also like having a spokesperson on hand to talk about events or to provide ‘sound bites’ explaining what is happening and why.

Print and broadcast interviews obviously differ in many ways, but the following advice generally applies to arranging, preparing for, and giving interviews:

Arranging an interview. Make sure you ask about the interviewer's objective and the context of the program. This will set the stage for the person being interviewed and help them with their preparation.

Prepare thoroughly for an interview. Organize your information, and write important points on note cards if necessary. Although the interviewers will have questions, keep key message points in mind and make sure that you get them across. In a broadcast situation where the interview may be live, one way to do this is to begin with: "I want to say that..." or "It's important that..."

Speak in simple, direct, and easy to understand statements. Incorporate your key messages into words that the vast consumer audience will understand.

When conducting the interview, try to incorporate the following talking points, as appropriate:

- Folic acid is important for every woman who could possibly become pregnant.
- Women who are thinking about becoming pregnant need to get 400 micrograms of folic acid every day at least a month before they get pregnant.
- Since most women don't know exactly when they will become pregnant, it's important to get enough folic acid every day just in case.
- Getting enough folic acid daily can prevent up to 70 percent of some types of serious birth defects that affect a baby's brain or spine.
- You can get folic acid through some enriched foods like breads, pasta, rice and cereals, but the easiest and best way is through a vitamin supplement.
- This issue is so important that a national coalition of more than 20 organizations have joined together to get these messages out to women.

You may also find the attached media Q & A document, which lists potential media questions and suggested responses, to help you prepare for interviews.

Broadcast interviews, especially on television, present additional factors for consideration. These mostly apply to how you will look on television - the key concern being that you don't want anything to distract from your message. To make the most of a television appearance, keep the following suggestions in mind:

- Avoid cloths with checks, stripes, and patterns. Medium-tone gray, blue, brown, or mixed colors are preferable.
- Avoid solid white blouses and shirts. Gray or light blue shades give the best effect.
- Avoid flashy accessories and jewelry that will catch the light. Don't wear glasses that turn dark in sunlight - they will darken under the strong TV lights.
- Resist the temptation to bend into the microphone; sit or stand up straight. Don't fold your arms.

- If sitting, pull your jacket snugly under you so that you don't slouch, cross your legs at the knee or ankle and don't swivel in your seat; if standing, plant your weight solidly on one foot to avoid swaying from side to side.
- Keep your eyes on the interviewer. Do not look at the camera or studio monitor.
- Use natural gestures, but avoid rapid hand movements that are difficult for the camera to follow.
- Never assume that you are off camera just because someone else is talking; you may still be in range of video and audio.

### **III. A Guide to Placement of Public Service Materials**

Public service materials are the central message platforms of communicating with the public in many social marketing campaigns. Paired with news media coverage, the use of public service materials ensures that the right messages get across to the target audience. That's because public service announcements (PSAs) are used by the media "as is" and, if developed properly, they are highly relevant and motivating to the target audience.

There has been debate recently about the effectiveness of public service advertisements. At issue is the limited availability of 'true' public service time, i.e. the free airing or printing of PSAs in the broadcast and print media. Some broadcast stations fulfill a public duty to run public service information for a percentage of their on-air time but the form that public service takes may vary. Moreover, newspapers and other print media are not required to run public service, although many see it in their interest to carry out a range of community service activities. But media outlets are also businesses that must make money to survive, and the way they do that is by selling advertising, which inevitably use the most desirable air times and space available. As a result, many in the public health communications field have negotiated promotional relationships as a way to guarantee that PSAs are given more desirable positioning in the media.

While the status of public service continues to change, the best approach to placing PSAs, in the absence of funding for advertising space, is by making a local media contact. Each local TV station, radio station, and newspaper makes its own commitment to public service and each is approachable based on that commitment. Many of the networks and major media have the resources to produce their own public service materials, however, many local media do not. Many local media have public service directors who decide whether to run PSAs, and when and where to place them. Because they look to local organizations for ideas and support, your input will be essential.

Much of the advice about working with the news media also applies to working with public service directors. Instead of asking the media to write a story based on your story angle and materials, you are pitching a 'pre-packaged' message in a format similar to an advertisement.

#### ***Public Service Advertising Materials***

The Council has designed a range of public service materials for local placement and use. These will also be used nationally, as appropriate. For example, the Council will approach women's magazines to place the print PSA and will also arrange a satellite feed of the TV PSA to all TV stations through the National Association of Broadcasters. However, your help in distributing the materials and following up with local media is essential if the PSAs are to receive significant media usage.

The PSAs were developed with target audience input to ensure that they would communicate messages in a way that is both relevant and compelling, and ultimately motivating. After all, the goal of social marketing is behavior change.

The CDC has produced the following materials that you can customize to use in your placement efforts:

- TV PSA
- Radio PSA
- Print PSA
- Poster
- Brochure

You can request copies and information about these materials through the web site at [www.cdc.gov/nceh/prevent/flo](http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/prevent/flo). Remember that there will be a second set of materials available in mid-late 1999.

### ***How to Place Public Service Advertising (PSAs)***

To increase the probability of the PSA being used by local media, you should be aware of the following elements:

- The ads are of high quality and have been professionally produced.
- The ads have a clear call to action for the consumer audience through a phone number or event date.
- You can provide local information or a local place to go.
- A toll free number to the CDC's information line on Folic Acid has been included in the PSAs so that the audience can get more information. A toll free number for Spanish language PSA viewers will be staffed by the National Coalition of Hispanic Health and Human Services Organization.

Step by step:

1. Identify public service directors of local media and compile your contact list.
2. Distribute materials.
3. Follow-up with personal contact.

Call the public service director to make sure the PSA and pitch letter were received. If it seems that your PSA is not a high priority, consider asking for an appointment to discuss why it is crucial to inform people about folic acid and why this specific message is important now. Some additional points to make:

- Emphasize the value and importance of the campaign to the station's audience, and make suggestions about when the PSA should be placed based on the timing of campaign events in your area.
- Explain that the station's efforts on your behalf will be recognized and appreciated by public health officials and community leaders, in addition to women of reproductive age.
- Also point out the broad coalition of organizations involved in this campaign.

## ***Building Media Partnerships and Thinking “Outside the Box”***

Up to this point, this kit has provided information on working with the news media and placing public service as separable activities. The following are some suggestions for integrating the two.

Coordinating public service with news events. One strategy to combine the two is to get the station’s news department interested in publicizing campaign events before speaking with the public service director. This will give you increased leverage when asking for placement of the PSA.

Co-sponsorship with the media. Media outlets may be willing to do more than provide publicity or run public service advertisements. Invite a television or radio station, local cable network, or area newspaper to co-sponsor your campaign or event. While a media outlet may want a certain degree of exclusivity in return for their promotional efforts, co-sponsorship can be a worthwhile endeavor if the outlet is very effective in reaching your target audience.

## IV. Sample Kit Materials

### National Council on Folic Acid Local News Media Pitch Letter

*Note: You can adapt this sample ‘pitch’ letter to inform local news media about your program or event. Use it as a cover letter to the sample press release, or with more information about other related activities in your area.*

[Date]

[Reporter/Editor Name]  
[Address]

Dear [Name]:

Even though a growing number of women now know that taking the B vitamin folic acid can help reduce the risk of having a baby with birth defects of the brain and spine, most do not know that it must be taken before pregnancy in order to be effective. The unfortunate fact is that if a woman doesn’t start taking folic acid until she is pregnant, then it may be too late.

[Local organization], as part of the National Council on Folic Acid, is conducting a campaign to spread this key message. The amount of folic acid that is in most multivitamins (0.4 mg or 400 mcg) must be taken every day at least one month before conception in order to have a full preventive effect. It is important that women understand why they should start taking folic acid now - **before** they get pregnant. Currently, less than a quarter of women get this necessary daily amount.

A news piece addressing this important issue would help educate women about the need to make folic acid a part of their daily routine, whether or not they are planning to become pregnant or not. With [number] unplanned pregnancies - or [about half] of all pregnancies - in [state], folic acid is something that all women of childbearing years should be aware of.

[Sample copy to promote local event:] To highlight this information, [name of organization] will be sponsoring a “Before You’re Pregnant” women’s health fair from [start time to end time] on [date] at [location] to encourage all women to start taking folic acid now.

Enclosed please find press materials [attach news release, fact sheet, other materials as appropriate] on folic acid and birth defects. I will call you to answer any questions or provide additional information. In the meantime, please do not hesitate to call me at [phone number]. I will also be able to put you in touch with local experts who can provide supportive information and interviews.

Sincerely,

[Name]  
[Title]  
[Organization]

Enclosures

**National Council on Folic Acid  
Local News Media Press Release**

*Note: This sample general press release will help increase folic acid awareness and promote the National Council's efforts to educate women about taking folic acid to prevent birth defects. Please customize the release with local information specific to your area to make it more relevant to local reporters, and send it to local news media.*

For Immediate Release  
[Date]

Contact: [Your Name]  
[Organization]  
[Telephone Number]

**[Your Organization Name] Urges Women To Take Folic Acid Before Pregnancy**

[Your Town, Your State]-- In the fight to prevent birth defects, sometimes "When?" is just as important as "How Much?" While a growing number of women are aware that taking the B vitamin folic acid can reduce their risk of having a baby with certain birth defects of the brain and spine, many are still unaware that it must be taken **before** pregnancy in order to be effective.

According to the National Council on Folic Acid, a partnership of national and state organizations dedicated to reducing birth defects by promoting the daily use of folic acid, less than one in ten women know that folic acid should be taken prior to conception. This important fact forms the basis of the Council's 1999 educational campaign, which [your organization name] is conducting in [state/local area] this year.

"Even though we have known for nearly a decade that folic acid can help prevent certain birth defects of the brain and spine, today less than a quarter of women are getting enough," said [spokesperson name]. "Our goal is to get more women to take the recommended daily amount of folic acid now - because if you wait until you are pregnant, it may be too late."

Achieving this goal is complicated by the fact that nearly half of all pregnancies in the U.S. are unplanned. In [state], of the over [number] pregnancies each year, [number] or [percentage] are unplanned. Because of this, the recommendation is that all women of childbearing age should take folic acid every day, whether or not they are actively planning a pregnancy.

As most women know, timing can be crucial when it comes to conception. It is the same with folic acid. The critical time when folic acid is needed is in the very first stage of pregnancy, when the cells are dividing and the fetus is just forming. In order to have sufficient folic acid in the body at this time, it is necessary for a woman to be taking 0.4 mg (400 mcg) daily. This is the amount that is in most multivitamins, and it must be taken **before** pregnancy to be effective. If taken by all women every day prior to conception and throughout the early stages of pregnancy, this amount of folic acid is estimated to reduce the incidence of neural tube defects by up to 70 percent.

Neural tube defects (NTDs) affect an estimated 4,000 pregnancies each year. The most common NTD, spina bifida, is the leading cause of childhood paralysis. Anencephaly, an NTD that affects the brain, results in miscarriage, stillbirth, or babies who live only a few days.

In addition to taking a daily multivitamin, experts also advise women to eat a balanced diet with foods rich in folate, like leafy green vegetables, orange juice, and beans. Certain breakfast cereals are fortified with folic acid, as are enriched breads and pastas. However, although it is possible to get enough folic acid by modifying and carefully planning your diet, experts caution that it is difficult to maintain the daily requirement without supplementing your diet with multivitamins or folic acid pills.

The National Council on Folic Acid is a coalition of organizations including government agencies, non-profit organizations, health professionals and community health groups who share a common interest in reducing birth defects. The Council aims to increase folic acid awareness and education among women and health care services for women, and to increase the level and availability of folic acid in food. Its ultimate goal is to eliminate preventable neural tube defects through the use of folic acid.

###

**National Council on Folic Acid  
Media Alert for Local Event Promotion**

*Note: You can use this form, or adapt this sample media alert, to fit your specific program or event.*

For Immediate Release  
[Date]

Contact: [Your Name]  
[Organization]  
[Telephone Number]

**“Before You’re Pregnant” Women’s Health Fair Set for [Date]**

**Media Alert**

**What:** “Before You’re Pregnant” Women’s Health Fair  
This event will feature free information, displays, booths and activities for all women, showcasing pre-pregnancy advice.  
Special events will include seminar with local expert [name] and pre-pregnancy diet and exercise class.

**Who:** Sponsored by [organization], with [supporting and contributing partners]

**When:** [Start time] to [Finish time]

**Where:** [Location]  
[Include directions if necessary]

**Why:** The purpose of this event is to help women navigate the maze of pre-pregnancy advice while encouraging them to think ahead about what they can do to ensure a healthy pregnancy and baby. What you do, or don’t do, before you get pregnant can directly affect your baby. For instance, many women know that taking folic acid every day can prevent certain birth defects but few realize that it must be taken before conception to be effective.

**Media Opportunity:** Photography: Governor/Mayor elect/spouse will be on hand to open the day and meet participants.  
Interviews: [expert names and affiliations] will be available [when] for interviews.

###

## **National Council on Folic Acid Media Q & As**

*The following pages are sample questions that you may get from the media and that you will want to be prepared to answer. These are for your reference, not for distribution, and you can expect that other questions may be asked.*

### **What is folic acid?**

Folic acid is an essential B vitamin that has been proven to help prevent neural tube defects when taken daily by women of childbearing age.

### **What birth defects does it prevent?**

Folic acid can help prevent birth defects of the spine and brain, which are called neural tube defects (also referred to as NTDs). The two main NTDs are spina bifida and anencephaly.

### **How common are these birth defects? How serious are they?**

Neural tube defects are common, serious birth defects that affect about 4,000 pregnancies each year in the U.S. About 1 out of every 1,000 infants born in the U.S. has spina bifida or anencephaly.

Spina bifida, which affects the spine, is the leading cause of childhood paralysis. Anencephaly, an NTD which affects the brain, is less common but always fatal, resulting in miscarriage, stillbirth, or a baby who lives for only a few days.

### **What causes them?**

Although we do not fully understand what causes these birth defects, they are the result of the incomplete development of the neural tube - the central column that forms the baby's spine and brain. Spina bifida results from the failure of the spinal column to close, leaving the spinal cord exposed. Anencephaly is marked by the incomplete development of the skull bones and a partially or completely absent brain.

What we do know is that these birth defects are largely preventable when women of child-bearing age take 0.4 mg (400 mcg) of synthetic folic acid every day, before they are pregnant.

### **Who is most at risk of having a baby with these birth defects?**

Any woman may have an affected pregnancy. Ninety-five percent of all affected pregnancies occur among women with no history of birth defects in their families. However, women who have already had an affected pregnancy are 20 times more likely to have subsequent affected pregnancies. Hispanic women and Caucasian women of Celtic descent also have a slightly higher risk.

### **How effective is folic acid in reducing their occurrence?**

Comprehensive studies in the early 90's show that 0.4 mg (400 mcg) of folic acid taken every day can reduce the incidence of these birth defects by up to 70 percent. If all women of childbearing age (15-45 years) consumed the recommended folic acid every day, it is estimated that up to 3,000 - or three quarters - of these birth defects could be prevented every year.

### **How much folic acid do women need to take?**

In order to prevent birth defects, the recommended daily allowance of folic acid is 0.4 mg (400 mcg). Because any woman may have an affected pregnancy, it is important that all women of childbearing age (15-45 years) take this amount of folic acid every day. It is also important that women take folic acid at least one month before they become pregnant.

### **Why do women need to take it before pregnancy?**

Because these birth defects occur very early in pregnancy, before most women realize they're pregnant, women must be taking folic acid at least one month before pregnancy to store sufficient amounts in their bodies. In addition, because half of all pregnancies in the U.S. are unplanned, all women of childbearing years, regardless of whether they are planning to become pregnant or not, should make folic acid part of their daily routine.

### **What is folate, and how does it differ from folic acid?**

Folate refers to the vitamin as it naturally occurs in foods, such as leafy green vegetables, orange juice, and beans. Folic acid refers to the synthetic vitamin found in multivitamins, supplements and fortified foods, such as bread, pasta and rice. While the terms are often used interchangeably, it is important to note that synthetic folic acid is more easily absorbed by the body. This means that it is easier to get enough folic acid through a multivitamin or fortified foods – like breakfast cereals – than through a diet that has lots of natural folate.

### **Is there a danger of taking too much folic acid?**

Unless recommended by a health provider, consumption should not exceed 1 milligram (1,000 micrograms) per day. Although the effects of higher intake are not well known, this limit has been set because it could complicate diagnosis of a type of anemia that is caused by a deficiency of vitamin B12, especially among older people. Unless you take more than one multivitamin per day, it would be difficult to exceed this limit.

### **What are the best sources of folic acid?**

There are two main ways women can get folic acid:

1. By taking a daily multivitamin or folic acid supplement - most of these contain the recommended daily amount of folic acid of 0.4 mg (400 mcg).

2. By eating foods fortified with folic acid, such as certain breakfast cereals, bread, rice, and pasta made with enriched flour or grain.

In addition, all women should eat a diet containing foods naturally rich in folate, such as leafy green vegetables, orange juice, beans, and lentils. Labels on fortified and folate rich foods will state whether they are good sources of folic acid; however, even these foods may not provide enough folic acid every day to prevent these birth defects for most women. Taking a multivitamin or folic acid supplement is often the easiest way for women to be sure they are getting enough folic acid every day.

### **Can most women get enough folic acid by modifying their diets?**

Although all women are encouraged to eat a healthy diet, including foods rich in folate, it can be difficult to get enough every day through diet alone. Your body needs about twice as much folate as folic acid to do the same job – and that’s difficult to get every day.

### **What about women who can’t take/can’t afford a multivitamin?**

Some women who have difficulty taking a multivitamin might be intolerant to another mineral in the vitamin, such as iron; or they might find a multivitamin difficult to swallow. These women could take a folic acid supplement – which is very small, easy to swallow, and inexpensive. Or, for women who really don’t like any vitamin pills at all, some brands of breakfast cereal are fortified with 100% of the recommended daily amount of folic acid.

### **Why aren’t multivitamins and folic acid supplements covered by health insurance/Medicaid?**

They are not considered medicines and are widely available over the counter, without a prescription. However, when a woman has had a previously affected pregnancy, a physician may prescribe folic acid supplements.

### **What are other health benefits to taking folic acid?**

As an essential vitamin, folic acid plays an important role in cell division and growth. In addition to ensuring the healthy development of the fetus, it is beneficial throughout life in the maintenance of the healthy cells, particularly along the internal and external linings of organs such as the lungs and the skin. Some studies have linked folic acid to a reduction in heart disease, cervical and colon cancers, and reduction in risk of other birth defects such as cleft lip, cleft palate and heart defects. Members of the National Council support continued research in these areas.

### **What is the National Council on Folic Acid, and what are the organization’s goals?**

The National Council on Folic Acid is a group of organizations with a common interest in reducing birth defects. The Council’s goal is to reduce the incidence of preventable NTDs by

increasing the number of women of childbearing age who take the recommended amount of folic acid every day.

### **Why are you doing this campaign?**

This first campaign from the Council is designed to communicate the important message to women that they should take folic acid every day **before** they get pregnant. Unfortunately, if they wait until they are pregnant, it may be too late. And, because half of all pregnancies are unplanned, it is important that all women who could possibly become pregnant make folic acid part of their daily routine now - it's an easy thing to do to help ensure a healthy baby.

### **What organizations comprise the governing body of the Council?\***

The Council is led by the March of Dimes, which provides management of Council activities, coordination of member programs, and funding for Council meetings.

The American Academy of Family Physicians	Association of State and Territorial Public Health Nutrition Directors
American Academy of Pediatrics	Association of Women's Health, Obstetric, and Neonatal Nurses
American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
American College of Physicians - American Society of Internal Medicine	March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation
American Dietetic Association	National Coalition of Hispanic Health and Human Services Organizations
American Nurses Association	National Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Coalition
American Medical Women's Association	Pan American Health Organization
American Pharmaceutical Association	Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs	Shriners Hospitals for Children
Association of State and Territorial Health Officials	Spina Bifida Association of America
	U.S. Department of Agriculture

*\*As of December 31, 1998.*

**National Council on Folic Acid  
Research Information:  
New Data To Use To Design Your Own Campaign**

**March of Dimes**

A 1998 March of Dimes survey, conducted by The Gallup Organization under a grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, revealed the following about women and folic acid:

- Most women, who take multivitamins containing the B vitamin folic acid, take them too late to prevent neural tube defects.
- Only 29 percent of American women 18-45 years of age who are not currently pregnant take a daily multivitamin containing folic acid. For those 18-24 years, the percentage drops to 19 percent, yet this age group accounts for 32 percent of all births in the U.S.
- The number of women who have heard of folic acid has increased from 52 percent in 1995 to 68 percent today. Yet there has been no corresponding increase in the number of women taking a multivitamin containing folic acid every day.
- Only 13 percent of those surveyed knew folic acid prevents birth defects, and only 7 percent knew that folic acid needs to be taken daily **before** pregnancy.

*The survey is based on telephone interviews with a national sample of 2,115 women ages 18-45 (error range is plus or minus three percentage points).*

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**

The CDC conducted focus group research to evaluate knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about multivitamin usage and folic acid, with women who are and who are not contemplating pregnancy. The following information was revealed:

**Women contemplating pregnancy**

- Women 18-35 years of age who are planning to get pregnant are more open to messages about a healthy pregnancy. Eighty-four percent of those would take a multivitamin and/or folic acid to prevent birth defects.
- They don't know when to take folic acid to achieve its protection for pregnancy.
- They think a good diet meets their needs but do not know how much and which foods they would need to eat to get the required amount of folic acid daily.

- Of these women, 55 percent are not taking a multivitamin. They tend to live in non-urban environments and are likely to be married with kids: the “traditional” American middle income family.

#### Women not contemplating pregnancy

- Women ages 18-35 who are not currently thinking about pregnancy are more resistant to behavior changes that could prevent birth defects.
- Since they are not planning a pregnancy, the folic acid message of birth defect prevention has less relevance in their daily lives.
- They tend to think their diet alone is good enough and have barrier issues about taking a multivitamin containing folic acid every day. These issues include cost, remembering to take it every day, and unfounded concern about weight gain.
- Of these women, 77 percent are not taking a daily multivitamin with folic acid. These women tend to live in urban environments and are less likely to be married.

## National Council on Folic Acid Media Pitch Script Scenarios

*This script is for your information – to think about possible questions and responses. It is not meant to be sent to the media. Reporters' comments are in bold italics, yours are in normal type.*

### # 1 Television Interview

A reporter at one of your local television stations comes to your office to tape an interview for her weekly health feature. Use your interviewing skills to communicate the key messages in succinct “sound bites.”

***Tell me about the current campaign you are conducting?***

[Name of your organization] is encouraging women to take folic acid every day **before** they get pregnant in order to reduce birth defects.

***Why are you doing this campaign?***

Many people may have heard of folic acid, but very few women realize that you need to take it before you get pregnant in order for it to be effective. If a woman takes 0.4 mg of folic acid every day before she is pregnant and during the early stages of pregnancy – that's 400 micrograms -- she can reduce the risk of having a baby with birth defects of the spine and brain.

***What are the birth defects that can be prevented?***

Folic acid helps prevent certain birth defects of the spine and brain that are also called neural tube defects. The most common of these birth defects is spina bifida, which is the leading cause of childhood paralysis. Another is anencephaly, which affects the brain and is always a fatal condition.

***How widespread are these birth defects?***

These are common, serious birth defects, affecting about 4,000 pregnancies each year in the U.S. and [number] in our state. The good news, however, is that they are largely preventable and this number could be dramatically decreased if more women took folic acid every day.

***Is this something that could happen to anyone?***

Any woman may have an affected pregnancy. Most of these pregnancies occur to women who have no family history of these birth defects.

***How does folic acid prevent these birth defects from occurring?***

Folic acid is a B vitamin essential to proper cell division and growth, and promotes the healthy development of the baby's neural tube - the central column that forms the baby's spine and brain. Because this growth occurs very early in pregnancy, it is vital that sufficient folic acid is present in the body before conception.

***How can women get the right amount of folic acid?***

The easiest way is to take a daily multivitamin - most of these contain the daily recommended amount of 0.4 mg (400 mcg). Some foods are fortified with folic acid – including some cereals, breads and pastas. In addition, women should be sure to eat a healthy diet, including food rich in folate, such as orange juice, leafy green vegetables, and beans.

***Why don't more women take folic acid?***

Only about one quarter of women are currently getting enough folic acid. Some women may not know about folic acid, but many may think it only applies to women who are already pregnant. However, because it needs to be taken before pregnancy, and because half of all pregnancies are unplanned, it is important that **all** women of childbearing age take it every day.

***Do women need to be concerned about getting too much folic acid?***

Unless your physician recommends it, you should not take more than 1 mg (1,000 mcg) of folic acid per day. This has been set as a safe upper limit. It would be hard to exceed it, though, unless you were taking more than one multivitamin a day.

## # 2 Newspaper Pitch

You're calling the newspaper's health reporter to encourage her/him to do a story on the need for all women to take folic acid before they get pregnant. She/he remembers doing a story about folic acid not so long ago. How will you convince her/him that this is a new angle that deserves further coverage?

After she/he answers the phone you say:

*Hi, my name is \_\_\_\_\_ with \_\_\_\_\_. I sent you some information on a new campaign about folic acid preventing birth defects. If you have some time to talk, I'd like to tell you about some important news that your readers may be interested in.*

***We've already done a story on folic acid. I don't think we'll do anything else on the topic just now.***

Thank you for the earlier story. Folic acid has been in the news and general awareness of folic acid has grown. However, we're highlighting some interesting new information in our campaign that dramatically affects its preventive effect. We've found that most women do not realize that folic acid must be taken **before** pregnancy in order to be effective. Unfortunately, if a woman waits until she is pregnant to take it, then it may be too late. According to recent statistics, fewer than one in ten women are aware of this fact.

***Why does folic acid have to be taken before pregnancy?***

The types of birth defects that folic acid helps prevent occur very early in pregnancy - often before most women know they are pregnant. In order to have enough folic acid in their bodies at that early stage, women should be taking it every day, at least one month before pregnancy in order to be fully effective.

***Are these birth defects very rare?***

These birth defects, called neural tube defects, are common and severe, affecting up to 4,000 pregnancies each year in the U.S. Spina bifida, which affects the spine, is the leading cause of childhood paralysis, and anencephaly is a fatal condition that affects the brain.

***How many pregnancies are affected in our area?***

[Check this statistic ahead of time and have it on hand to demonstrate local relevance. If state or other local figures are not available, supplement the above by adding that about 1 out of every 1,000 infants born in the U.S. has either spina bifida or anencephaly.]

*Are these birth defects genetic?*

We don't know exactly what causes them - probably a combination of genetic, environmental and dietary factors. We do know, however, that taking 0.4 mg of folic acid – that's 400 micrograms – every day, before pregnancy and during the early stages of pregnancy, can reduce the risk of these birth defects by up to 70 percent. Although Hispanic women and Caucasian women of Celtic descent may have a slightly higher risk, any woman can have an affected pregnancy.

*Does this advice apply to all women?*

All women of childbearing age should take folic acid every day - especially considering that half of all pregnancies are unplanned. It's important that women know to take it **before** pregnancy - that's why we're participating in this new campaign with the National Council on Folic Acid, working with [name partners, such as local doctors, other local Council affiliates] to get this message out.

*Please resend me the information and we'll consider the story. Do you have any local doctors who are experts?*

Thank you. This story would be important to help your audience, and help reduce birth defects. We have a number of local experts you can talk to - I'll send you the list with brief bio's. I'll check back with you to see if you need anything else.

### **# 3 Radio Remote**

Your local radio station is doing a live remote from your “Before You’re Pregnant” health fair. You want to use this opportunity to talk about the health fair and get more people to come to it, but you also want to make sure that you get the key message about folic acid across. You find a quiet place where you are not likely to be interrupted, and sit down with the reporter to be interviewed live, on-air.

***We’re here at [location] for the “Before You’re Pregnant” health fair, talking with [your name]. Tell me about what you’re doing today?***

[Name of organization] is hosting this fair today to provide women with free pre-pregnancy advice and information. Whether you’re thinking about getting pregnant soon or sometime in the future, there’s a lot you can do now to ensure a healthy baby some day.

***What are some of the things you can do?***

In addition to eating right, exercising and getting plenty of rest, there are several things you can do before getting pregnant to have a healthy baby - some of which you may not be aware. For instance, you may have heard about folic acid, the B vitamin that can help prevent birth defects - but you may not know that you should take it every day before you get pregnant in order for it to be most effective.

***Why is that?***

The birth defects that folic acid helps prevent happen very early during pregnancy - before most women know they are pregnant. Because it takes some time for your body to build up sufficient stores of folic acid, you need to be taking it every day for at least a month before conception takes place.

***How can you get folic acid?***

The easiest way to get the right amount of folic acid every day is to take a multivitamin or vitamin supplement, and to eat foods enriched with folic acid, like breads, rice and pastas. In addition, we should all eat a balanced diet including foods rich in folate, such as leafy green vegetables, orange juice, and beans.

***What else can you do before you get pregnant?***

[Depending on your activity and the amount of time allotted for the interview, you may want to highlight such advice as: not smoking, not drinking alcohol, not using drugs, staying away from toxic chemicals in the home and at work, not handling cat litter, etc. Also, you may be giving mini-check-ups at the fair, if so, promote this fact and discuss need for immunizations and reviewing prescribed medications if you want to get pregnant.]

***What about women who aren't planning to get pregnant?***

Many pregnancies are unplanned or mis-timed. It's estimated that half of all pregnancies in the U.S. are not planned - so this information really is just as important for all women who are capable of becoming pregnant. You may think it can't happen to you, but if you are sexually active it might. Any birth control method can fail. By the time you realize you may be pregnant, those first few weeks which can be so important to your baby's health have already passed. Also, things like exercise, eating right, and taking folic acid, are good for you as well as your future baby.

***Any final words for our listeners?***

Take care of yourself and your future baby by taking folic acid now - before you are pregnant. It's an easy thing to do to give your baby a healthy start. The time to prevent birth defects is **before** you know you are pregnant. Get enough folic acid every day, by taking a vitamin as part of a healthy diet that contains fortified foods like cereals, and foods with folate, like leafy green vegetables, beans and orange juice.

[If the interviewer does not do so, also take the opportunity to mention one final time the location of the health fair, hours of operation, directions if needed, and the fact that it is free to the public.]

#### # 4 Voicemail

You call a television assignment editor to suggest that the station do a story about the need for women to take folic acid before they get pregnant. You get voice mail, and now have about 30 seconds to convince them to consider a story.

Here are some different approaches to consider:

***New Campaign:*** Hello, this is [name] from [organization]. My number is [###-####]. We recently sent you some information about a new campaign on folic acid and the prevention of birth defects. You may have heard that this B vitamin can help prevent birth defects, but like most people, you might not be aware that it has to be taken every day before a woman actually gets pregnant in order to be effective. A story around this important fact could help reduce some serious birth defects. We have a number of experts lined up and could provide good visuals for the story (such as at a doctor's office, hospital nursery, or at a health fair). Please call me at [###-####] for more information or an interview.

***Preventable Birth Defects:*** Hello, this is [name] from [organization]. My number is [###-####]. Over 4,000 pregnancies this year will be affected by a birth defect of the brain or spine. Yet these common, serious birth defects are largely preventable - if only more women took folic acid every day before they got pregnant. What most women don't know is that if they wait until they get pregnant before they take folic acid, then it may be too late. We're conducting a local campaign about this, and would like to talk with you about a story on this important new information. Please call me at [###-####] and I can send you more background information, line you up with our experts, and give you ideas for story visuals.

***Timely Hook/Pre-pregnancy Health:*** Hello, this is [name] from [organization]. My number is [###-####]. I'm calling to interest you in doing a story about healthy babies that ties in to a local campaign we're doing right now. There's a lot of prenatal advice - and what you do even before you get pregnant can be just as important. In order to prevent birth defects, for instance, women should be taking folic acid every day at least a month before conception. Our research shows most women don't know this. Please call me at [###-####] and I can help you with pre-pregnancy planning information and experts for a timely story that would be of great interest to all women. (This approach could also be tailored for different events throughout the year, or for seasons. For example, for Mother's Day: "You might not think of yourself as a mother - but maybe you should.")

## # 5 Public Service Director Pitch

You call a television or radio public service director to encourage her to use the PSA. She says the station is already running their quota of PSAs right now. Your challenge is to convince her that there is room for one more PSA. You also want to promote a local health fair for women that your organization is hosting.

After introducing yourself, you say:

We sent you a tape and background information for a PSA encouraging women to take folic acid every day before they get pregnant in order to prevent birth defects. Have you had a chance to review it?

***No, but we're already running our quota of PSAs right now. We don't have much available time for PSAs and I have a lot of tapes already stacked on my desk, so I don't know when we might get to it, if at all.***

I understand there's a great demand for public service from a lot of worthwhile causes, but if you have some time, I'd like to tell you a little bit about what we're doing and why it is an important message at this time. Our campaign is about women's health and the health of children. The main message is that women need to take folic acid every day **before** they get pregnant in order to prevent some common, serious birth defects.

***I think we already ran something about folic acid and birth defects last year.***

I appreciate that, thank you. This new campaign is part of an on-going effort by the National Council on Folic Acid to prevent birth defects. This particular spot highlights the fact that folic acid must be taken every day even before a woman gets pregnant. Not only are most women not getting enough folic acid every day, but even more of them are not aware that you need to be taking it up to a month **before** conception in order for it to be effective. That's a very specific message that's absolutely vital - unfortunately if a woman waits until she knows she is pregnant it may be too late.

***Why is that?***

The birth defects that folic acid helps prevent happen very early during pregnancy - before most women know they are pregnant. Because it takes some time for your body to build up sufficient stores of folic acid, you need to be taking it every day for at least a month before conception takes place.

***Still, that's a fairly narrow audience - women who are planning to get pregnant. We prefer materials that serve the general public.***

Actually, this message applies more broadly. Because over half of all pregnancies in the U.S. are unplanned, it is important that all women who might get pregnant be aware of this information -

that's about [have number of women 15-45 in your state/area ready to cite here]. If all these women took folic acid every day, we could greatly reduce the number of these birth defects - that's our ultimate goal.

***How many children are born with these defects?***

They affect about 4,000 pregnancies each year. About 1 in every 1,000 infants born in the U.S. has one of the two main defects we are talking about - spina bifida and anencephaly. Spina bifida is the most common disabling birth defect and the leading cause of childhood paralysis. Babies with anencephaly die either before or during childbirth, or live just a few days.

***What does the spot look like/sound like?***

It's a professionally produced spot that's very appealing, emotional and motivating. It was extensively field tested with women in the target audience. It also gives some information about how to get folic acid every day.

Also, we are backing up the PSA campaign with lots of local activities, such as [describe community-based activities]. I will also be contacting the news media with recent research and information - and it would be ideal if you could link the PSA with local news about what we're doing in [state/town].

***I'll see if I can find the package and look at/listen to the tape.***

Thanks. Running this spot could help prevent birth defects in children, and is important for your female audience. The package was sent to you [when], is [describe distinguishing characteristics of package if any] and has [organization's] name on the return address. I'll call back in a few days to make sure you've found it and see what you've decided.

[Then follow up again in a few days]

**National Council on Folic Acid  
Public Service Advertising Pitch Letter**

*Note: You can customize this letter to public service directors and send it with copies of the public service announcements.*

[Date]

[Public Service Director Name]

[Address]

Dear [Name]:

Even before a woman knows she is pregnant, it may be too late to prevent some common birth defects. Each year, an estimated 4,000 pregnancies in the U.S. are affected with birth defects of the spine and brain - that's more than the number of infants born with HIV or congenital rubella syndrome. What binds these important conditions is the sad fact that they are all largely preventable.

In order to prevent these birth defects, all women need to do is take 0.4 mg (400 mcg) of the B vitamin folic acid every day. Here's the critical part: To be effective, they need to do this **before** they get pregnant. These birth defects develop early during pregnancy - before most women know they are pregnant. Unless a women is taking the daily recommended amount at least a month before conception, there will not be sufficient amounts in the body during this important early stage.

Getting this amount of folic acid is an easy thing to do. The simplest way of ensuring that you are getting enough is to take a daily multivitamin and eat fortified cereals and grains as part of a healthy diet.

This campaign is part of an ongoing national effort by the National Council on Folic Acid, a coalition of more than 20 organizations, to reduce the number of birth defects by promoting folic acid. Very few women are aware that folic acid can prevent birth defects, and even fewer are aware that it must be taken before pregnancy. Here in [location/state], we are working with [list partners] on a variety of community and media outreach activities [you can customize/describe briefly]. You can help reach the thousands of local women of childbearing age who may not be aware of this important information. Please [air/print] the enclosed PSA as often as possible so your [viewers/listeners/readers] can become aware of the risks and start taking folic acid every day from now on. If more women start doing this, we can greatly reduce the number of these severe birth defects.

[For radio: Enclosed you will find a bounce back card. Please complete and return as addressed so we can effectively track when and where the PSA is being used.] If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me at [###-####]. Your assistance is important and appreciated.

Sincerely,

[Name]

[Title]

[Organization]

Enclosures

**National Council on Folic Acid  
Public Service Advertising Fact Sheet**

*Note: Customize and attach this fact sheet to the PSA Pitch letter and send both with the PSA. This will give the public service director additional background information on the scope and importance of the campaign in a succinct format.*

[Date]

Contact: [Your Name]

[Organization]

[Telephone Number]

**Fact Sheet:**

**National Council on Folic Acid 1999 Campaign**

**Background**

- In the early 1990's, conclusive research showed that daily intake of the B vitamin folic acid could help prevent the frequency of certain birth defects of the spine and brain by as much as 70 percent.
- These birth defects, called neural tube defects (NTDs) are common and severe. Spina bifida, which affects the spine, is the most common disabling birth defect and the leading cause of childhood paralysis. Anencephaly is a condition that affects the brain and is always fatal.

**Early Actions**

- In 1992, the U.S. Public Health Service issued guidelines recommending that all women capable of becoming pregnant should consume 0.4 mg (400 mcg) of folic acid per day, for the purpose of reducing their risk of having a pregnancy affected with spina bifida or other NTDs.
- The FDA began a food fortification program that required that folic acid be added to specific flour, breads and other grains. Many staple food products, such as cereals, breads, flours, corn meals, rice, noodles and pasta, are now fortified with folic acid - but it is important to note that food fortification alone is unlikely to provide the average diet with the minimum daily requirement.
- Efforts to educate women about folic acid and preventing birth defects were also carried out by a number of individual organizations. These include state based public health campaigns and national efforts by non-profits such as the March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation.
- The March of Dimes also began a biannual Gallup poll of women's knowledge and behavior on issues related to health pregnancy, including folic acid. Information about this survey can be obtained from the March of Dimes by calling 1-888-MODIMES.

## Current Situation

- While awareness of folic acid has grown (from 52 percent of women in 1995 to 68 percent today), knowledge about the link between folic acid and preventing birth defects is still limited. As recently as 1998, only 13% of women knew that folic acid helps prevent birth defects.
- More importantly, few women are getting the necessary daily amount required to prevent birth defects. Only 29 percent of women between 18 and 45 who are currently not pregnant take a daily multivitamin containing folic acid.
- To address this problem, a number of organizations with a common interest in reducing birth defects, formed the National Council on Folic Acid in 1997 under the leadership of the March of Dimes and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). A full list of current council members is listed at the end of this fact sheet.
- In addition, Congress passed a new Birth Defects Prevention Act in March 1998. This bipartisan legislation established the first nationwide network of state and regional programs for birth defects research and prevention. It assures continued funding for birth defects surveillance and research, and commits to new funding for prevention and education programs.

## Council Goals and Activities

- The purpose of the National Council on Folic Acid is to promote the consumption of folic acid among consumer and professional audiences, sharing information and developing collaborative programs among the members, establishing consistent messages, preventing duplication of efforts, and developing new ideas for folic acid education.

Some of the Council's recent activities include:

- March of Dimes launched a multi-year public health education campaign on folic acid in October 1998, pledging \$10 million over the next three years to folic acid efforts aimed at reducing the incidence of NTDs in the U.S. by 30 percent by the year 2001. The campaign included a PSA featuring a baby in traffic to dramatize the need for women to consume folic acid to prevent birth defects, and many local March of Dimes chapters are establishing local councils to conduct educational and community activities.
- CDC has developed national public health campaign materials on folic acid, for release in 1999. This includes PSAs and health education materials for states and local Council members. The campaign's PSAs- "Before You Know It" - were designed to communicate the main message to take folic acid before pregnancy. CDC also announced its intent to help campaigns evaluate their efforts.

- The Spina Bifida Association of America (SBAA) has filed a citizen’s petition with the FDA asking the agency to increase its level of required fortification of enriched cereal grains. In addition, the organization has produced a PSA with First Lady Hillary Clinton.
- The Association of Women’s Health, Obstetric, and Neonatal Nurses (AWHONN) is actively involved in providing information on folic acid as part of routine pre-conception counseling to its members.
- Five organizations - AAP, ACOG, AWHONN, ACP–ASIM, and National HMHB Coalition – have been sending educational mailings to their members under grants from the March of Dimes.

Members of the Governing Body of the National Council on Folic Acid:

The American Academy of Family Physicians	Association of State and Territorial Public Health Nutrition Directors
American Academy of Pediatrics	Association of Women’s Health, Obstetric, and Neonatal Nurses
American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
American College of Physicians/American Society of Internal Medicine	March of Dimes Birth Defect Foundation
American Dietetic Association	National Coalition of Hispanic Health and Human Services Organizations
American Nurses Association	National Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Coalition
American Medical Women’s Association	Pan American Health Organization
American Pharmaceutical Association	Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs	Shriners Hospitals for Children
Association of State and Territorial Health Officials	Spina Bifida Association of America
	U.S. Department of Agriculture