

Dr Sally Hope talks to you

Woman²woman

She's a GP and a mum of two, and she's waiting to help you with your medical problems.

A second opinion on Folic acid during pregnancy



Helen's son Karl leads an active life despite his condition and loves playing wheelchair basketball

Folic acid could have stopped my son's illness...

When I fell pregnant with Karl, now eight, my husband Chris and I were thrilled. It wasn't until I went for my first antenatal check-up at 12 weeks that a doctor asked, "Are you taking folic acid?" I'd never heard of it, but he explained that it could prevent conditions

such as spina bifida, and so I started taking the 400mcg recommended.

I had all the regular check-ups, and there was nothing unusual. It wasn't until Karl was born that we knew he had spina bifida.

I was numb and confused. I just didn't realise the implications

Karl's condition would have for my family. It's a 24/7 job looking after Karl because he has the most severe form of spina bifida, and also hydrocephalus, which is fluid on the brain.

By the time I fell pregnant with Liam, now five, we'd had genetic counselling. The counsellor told us I should

take an extra-strong prescription dose of folic acid for at least six months before I tried for baby. Thankfully, Liam was born healthy.

Karl goes to a mainstream school, even though he is in a wheelchair and has an almost full-time teaching assistant. His favourite pastime is wheelchair basketball and he practises with the Nottingham Jaguars.

I tell women about folic acid, although it can be difficult to bring up. No one can say for sure that Karl's condition is because of a lack of folic acid, but I now know it can prevent spina bifida. For a long time I felt

guilty, but I don't now – Karl is a wonderful child.

Dr Hope, how can folic acid prevent spina bifida? And when should women start taking it?

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Dr Hope says

Folic acid is a vitamin found in leafy foods. It helps the foetal nerve cells form the spinal cord, with the vertebral column protecting it.

I advise women to start taking folic acid a month

before they start trying to conceive, and for the first 12 weeks of a pregnancy.

Despite recent scares that it may be linked with breast cancer, the Royal College of GPs says that those were high-dose supplements and recommends the 400mcg supplement as safe. It is thought that at

least 50 per cent of spina bifida cases would be prevented and, as 1000 pregnancies every year are affected, it would make a big impact.

● For more info on spina bifida and hydrocephalus, visit www.asbah.org

● For more info on Folic Acid Action visit www.microfolicacid.com/faa

Embarrassing question

Q I've been trying to have sex with my boyfriend but he can't penetrate me. I'm 18 and haven't had a period yet. What can I do?

A There are two issues here. Firstly, it is rare to have a vagina so small that it can't admit a penis, since they are elastic. But there is a membrane, the hymen, across the vagina which is often broken before a girl has sex, by using a tampon. As you have not had a period, you won't have used one. Or it

could be that you feel very nervous. Girls can get into such an emotional state that the strong muscles around the vagina go into spasm, not allowing the penis to enter. This can be overcome by relaxation and taking things slowly. Have you been dieting lately? A very low weight, less than 8st, is the commonest reason for never starting your periods, but there can be other reasons. Explain your situation to your GP, who will refer you to a specialist gynaecologist.

 **Phone for advice on**

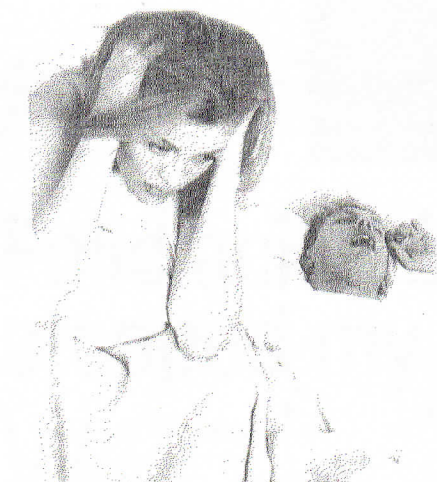
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Sound of silence

Q My husband snores so loudly I've moved into the spare room. He now thinks I don't love him, but I cannot work without sleep. Do all men snore?

A No, and some women snore too! Men who snore tend to be fatter, and have a flabby soft palate that vibrates as the air goes in and out. Snorers are mouth breathers, and alcohol makes it worse. So, if you really love him, put him on a diet, and drag him along to his GP to get him referred to an ENT clinic to discuss possible surgery. Snoring isn't good for him, either. There is a condition called sleep apnoea syndrome which causes people to actually stop breathing for a few seconds when asleep. This is bad for the brain cells as they get starved of oxygen, and sufferers

wake up feeling tired. There are specialised sleep laboratories around the country where you get tucked up for the night, while wired up to all sorts of machinery that can monitor if you have sleep apnoea so it can then be treated.

