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Vitamin that's vital for a healthy baby

WOMEN could be putting their unborn baby at risk by failing to take the necessary nutrients before they get pregnant.

Although most mums-to-be know the importance of folic acid many are not taking it at the right time – just before they conceive and during the first few weeks.

Folic acid helps reduce the risk of neural tube defects such as spina bifida, which occurs when there is a fault in the spinal column.

Every year about 1,000 pregnancies are affected by the condition and many parents take the difficult decision to have an abortion.

Rosemary Batchelor, of the Association for Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus said: "Overall awareness about folic acid is quite good, but women and even health professionals are often not aware of the critical window for supplementation – one month pre-conception and up to 12 weeks into pregnancy.

"This is compounded by around 50 per cent of pregnancies being unplanned. Only 28 per cent of those planning a pregnancy take folic acid pre-conceptually and fewer than a third take it in the first six weeks – the critical window.

That means that 40 per cent of moth-

ers are not taking this essential vitamin at the optimum time for it to have any real benefit.

"The majority of pregnancies are therefore not benefiting from the easy and inexpensive risk-reduction offered by folic acid supplementation combined with a diet rich in fruit and vegetables."

Folic acid is a B vitamin that helps build healthy cells. It is water soluble and so it is quickly flushed from the body which is why it should be taken every day.

It comes in two types: natural form such as green leafy vegetables, nuts, beans, citrus fruits, beans, meats, orange juice and brewers yeast, and in a synthetic form which is found in fortified breakfast cereals, fortified bread and supplements.

Although it does occur naturally, a health-balanced diet may struggle to get half of the recommended intake. It has been suggested that 12 cups of spinach are needed for the total recommended daily allowance so women are advised to take 400 micrograms from a daily supplement and 200 micrograms from a healthy diet.

Folic acid can help to prevent up to 50 per cent of birth defect cases as long as it is taken before the baby is conceived and during early pregnancy.