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# Weighing up the benefits of folic acid

WOMEN who don't take enough folic acid are more likely to have underweight babies, research has shown.

A study of 1,000 new mothers has for the first time shown a link between levels of folic acid - a form of vitamin B - and baby weights.

Mothers-to-be are already advised to boost their folic acid intake to help prevent brain and spine defects such as spina bifida.

But many are still not taking enough, particularly in the first few weeks of pregnancy - a critical time in the development of babies and their brains.

Now, researchers have found that women with higher levels of folic acid in their blood are more likely to give birth to heavier, healthier babies.

Underweight babies - classed as less than 5lb 8oz - are more likely to suffer from Cerebral Palsy, respiratory problems and a range of other problems associated with healthy development.

The findings have reinforced calls for everyday foods such as flour to be fortified with folic acid, which is found naturally in green, leafy vegetables, citrus fruit, wholemeal breads and cereals.

A team led by Dr Joanne Relton at Newcastle University monitored the pregnancies of almost 1,000 women who attended West Cumberland Hospital in Cumbria.

The women were questioned about their lifestyle and had blood samples taken three months into their pregnancies which were analysed for levels of folic acid. The

weights of their babies were then recorded at birth.

Smokers in particular had lower levels of the vitamin. This is thought to be because folic acid is stored in red blood cells and smoking may affect the blood cells' ability to store the vitamin.

Women are advised to take a 400

## 'Important in every pregnancy'

microgram supplement of folic acid from the time they stop using contraception to 12 weeks into pregnancy.

However, with around half of pregnancies unplanned, many women do not start the supplements until their pregnancy is con-

firmed. Dr Relton said: 'Folic acid is highly important in preventing birth defects which affect a small number of pregnancies.'

'This study suggests it is also important in every pregnancy to help the developing baby reach a healthy birth weight.'

'However, many women are missing this critical window in the first few weeks of gestation, during which their baby really needs folic acid to grow and develop.'

Fortifying everyday foods may be the answer, rather than a campaign to encourage women to take folic acid supplements, she said.

'Our previous research shows younger women and those from deprived backgrounds are less likely to take these supplements and although some cereals are currently fortified in the UK, they tend to be the more expensive, brand-

name products.' In the U.S. the number of babies born with brain and spinal defects has fallen by a quarter since the fortification of flour and bread with folic acid in 1998.

It is estimated similar regulations here could prevent up to 1,000 abortions a year which are carried out when neural tube defects are picked up early in pregnancy.

The vitamin is also said to help prevent heart disease and strokes in later life.

A spokesman for the Association for Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus said: 'It is very, very difficult for pregnant women to get enough folic acid from their diet alone.'

'And women who haven't planned their pregnancy are unlikely to be taking a supplement very early in pregnancy.'