



October is Spina Bifida Awareness Month

What is spina bifida?

Spina bifida is characterized by the incomplete development of the brain, spinal cord, and/or meninges (the protective covering around the brain and spinal cord). In most cases, spina bifida is diagnosed before birth, usually during the second trimester of pregnancy using maternal serum alpha fetoprotein (MSAFP) screening and fetal ultrasound. However, some mild cases may go unnoticed until after birth. Very mild cases, in which there are no symptoms, may never be detected.

Quick facts

- Spina bifida is the most common neural tube defect in the United States.
- It affects 1,500 to 2,000 of the more than 4 million babies born in the United States each year.
- There is currently no cure for spina bifida.
- The damaged or lost nerve tissue cannot be repaired or replaced, nor can function be restored to the damaged nerves.
- Treatment depends on the type and severity of the disorder.

Can spina bifida be prevented?

Folic acid, also called folate, is an important vitamin in the development of a healthy fetus. Studies have shown that if all women who could become pregnant were to take a multivitamin with the B-vitamin folic acid, the risk of neural tube defects could be reduced by up to 70%.

Folic acid is a water soluble B-vitamin that helps build healthy cells. Because it is water soluble, folic acid does not stay in the body for very long, so women need to take it every day to help reduce the risk of neural tube defects.

Although taking this vitamin cannot guarantee having a healthy baby, it can help. Recent studies have shown that by adding folic acid to their diets, women of childbearing age significantly reduce the risk of having a child with a neural tube defect, such as spina bifida. Since many pregnancies can be unplanned, women of childbearing age, should take **400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid every day** to reduce their risk of having a child with Spina Bifida. In addition, women who have experienced a pregnancy affected by a neural tube defect like Spina Bifida, need a larger prescription dose of folic acid daily when planning a future pregnancy. Foods high in folic acid include dark green vegetables, egg yolks, and some fruits. Many foods (such as some breakfast cereals, enriched breads, flours, pastas, rice, and other grain products) are now fortified with folic acid.

Optima Health also offers the MyLife MyPlan Partners in Pregnancy Program to provide guidance, support, and education to all expectant mothers with Optima Health insurance. Visit the "Program and Wellness" section of our Web site, optimahealth.com. For more information on spina bifida, visit the National Institutes of Health at ninds.nih.gov.