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FOLIC ACID AND THE PREVENTION OF BIRTH DEFECTS

A NATIONAL SURVEY OF PRE-PREGNANCY AWARENESS AND BEHAVIOR AMONG WOMEN OF CHILDBEARING AGE, 1995-2001

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

In 1992, the U.S. Public Health Service (PHS) recommended that all women who are capable of becoming pregnant consume 400 micrograms of the B vitamin folic acid per day to reduce their risk of having a pregnancy affected by neural tube defects. In 1995, the March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation received funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to conduct a benchmark survey of women of childbearing age to assess their knowledge and behaviors relative to daily consumption of folic acid. The survey found relatively low awareness of folic acid and the PHS recommendation, suggesting the need for educational strategies to inform more women about the benefits of folic acid.

Since 1995, the March of Dimes and other agencies have conducted public education campaigns urging women of childbearing age to consume folic acid every day beginning before pregnancy to improve her chances of having a healthy baby. In 1999, the March of Dimes initiated a national folic acid campaign, one year after mandatory folic acid fortification of grain products in the United States. Preliminary findings from studies by the CDC and others suggest increases in levels of blood folate among women of childbearing age and decreases in rates of neural tube defects over the past several years.

Since the 1995 survey, the March of Dimes has commissioned The Gallup Organization to conduct four follow-up surveys to measure any changes that may have occurred since 1995 in women's awareness and behavior relative to folic acid and other pre-pregnancy health issues. As such, these surveys serve as rough measures of effectiveness of the educational campaigns designated to increase awareness of folic acid among women of childbearing age. Many of the questions from the 1995 survey were repeated in each of the follow-up surveys to create trend data.

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March of Dimes Survey
Executive Summary/page 2

The survey results for each of the following years are based on telephone interviews with a national sample of women, age 18-45.

YEAR	Number of Interviews	Survey Dates
1995	2010	Jan 19 - Feb 23, 1995
1997	2001	Jan 1 - March 3, 1997
1998	2115	July 2 - August 21, 1998
2000	2013	Jan 13 - Feb 17, 2000
2001	2001	April 14 - May 22, 2001

For results based on samples of this size, one can say with 95 percent confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects could be plus or minus three percentage points. For comparisons involving subsets of the sample, the margin of error would be greater. Please refer to tables of recommended sampling tolerances in the technical appendix for more detailed information. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in obtaining respondents can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

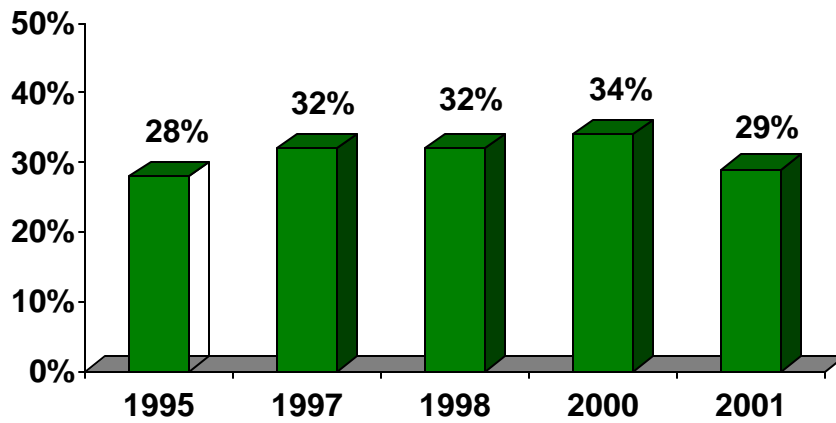
The March of Dimes is a national voluntary health agency whose mission is to improve the health of babies by preventing birth defects and infant mortality. Founded in 1938, the March of Dimes funds programs of research, community services, education, and advocacy to save babies. For more information, visit the March of Dimes Web site at www.modimes.org or the Spanish Web site at www.nacersano.org, or call 1-888-MODIMES.

Vitamin Use

While awareness of folic acid and its benefits has continued to increase since 1995, in 2001 the proportion of all women age 18-45 who report taking a multivitamin on a daily basis is 29 percent.

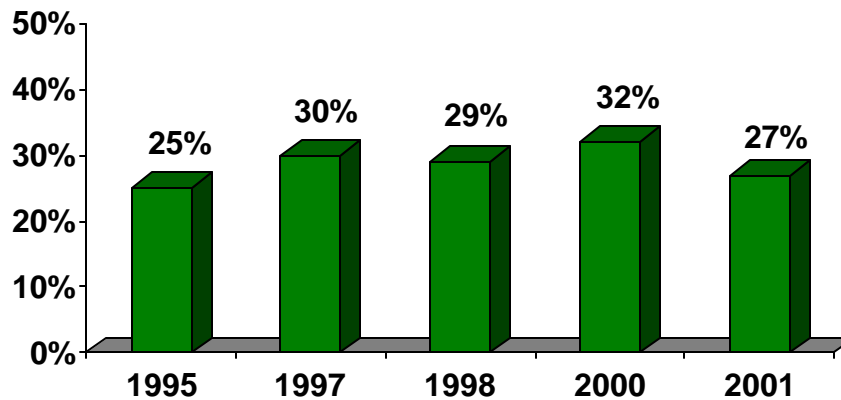
Although this represents no change from 1995, there has been a significant decline in daily vitamin use since 2000.

**TAKE VITAMIN CONTAINING FOLIC ACID DAILY
(Based on all women age 18-45)**



Of women who were not pregnant at the time of the survey, 27 percent report taking a vitamin containing folic acid daily, again similar to the 25 percent in 1995, but a decrease from the 32 percent in 2000.

**TAKE VITAMIN CONTAINING FOLIC ACID DAILY
(Based on women age 18-45 who are not pregnant)**



Of all women surveyed in 2001, those least likely to consume a vitamin containing folic acid daily include women:

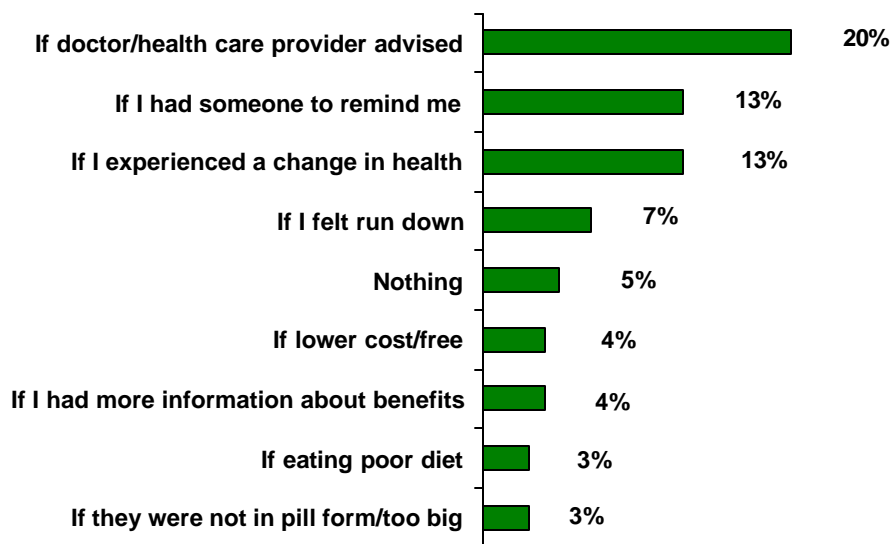
- 18-24 years (22 percent compared with 31 percent for those 25-45 years)
- Who have not attended college (24 percent compared with 32 percent among women who have attended college)
- Those with annual household incomes under \$25,000 (22 percent compared with 35 percent for those earning \$50,000 or more).

Rates by United States region ranged from 31 percent in the West, 30 percent in the East and 29 percent in the Midwest, while among women residing in the South, the proportion was 26 percent.

Things That Might Encourage Women to Take Multivitamins

Women who do not take a vitamin or mineral supplement on a daily basis were asked what, if anything, would make them more likely to do so. Unprompted, 20 percent said they would be more likely to do so if their doctor or health care provider recommended they take it. Thirteen percent said they would be more likely to take a multivitamin daily if they had someone to remind them. A similar proportion (13 percent) report that they would be more likely to take a multivitamin daily if they experienced a change in their health. Seven percent report they would be more likely to take a multivitamin daily if they felt run down.

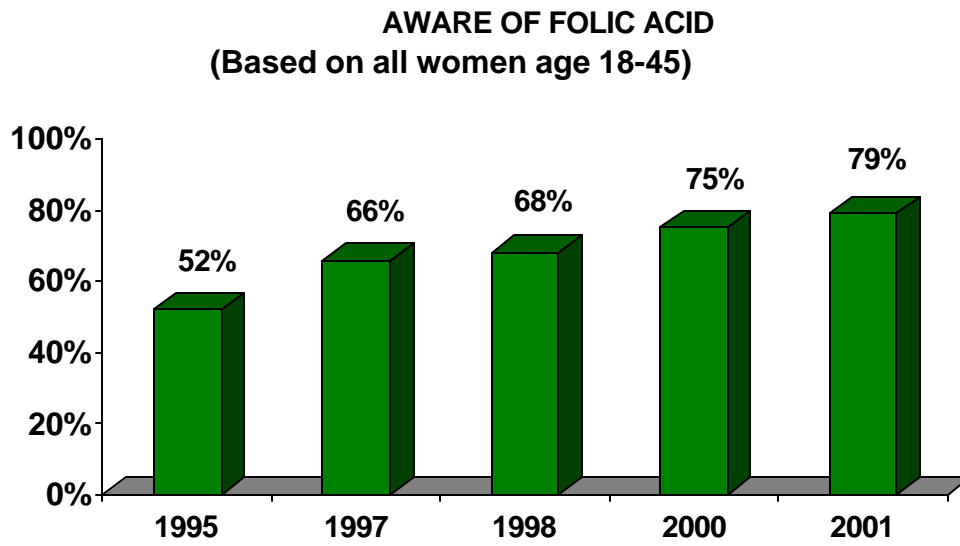
**TYPES OF THINGS THAT MIGHT ENCOURAGE WOMEN TO TAKE A
MULTIVITAMIN DAILY**
(Based on women who do not take vitamin or mineral supplements daily)



NOTE: Question was asked for the first time in 2001.

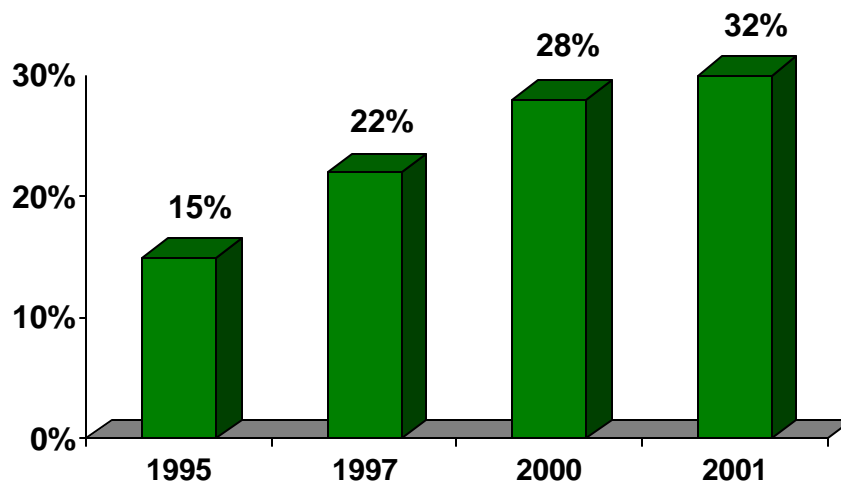
Folic Acid Awareness

Since the benchmark study of 1995, there has been a steady increase in awareness of folic acid among women of childbearing age from 52 percent in 1995 to 79 percent in 2001. Similarly, more women today now say they have heard of the U.S. Public Health Service's recommendation regarding folic acid for women of childbearing age.



Since 1995, awareness of the U.S. Public Health Service's recommendation regarding folic acid has more than doubled from 15 percent in 1995 to 32 percent in 2001.

**AWARE OF U.S. PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE'S RECOMMENDATION
REGARDING FOLIC ACID**
(Based on all women age 18-45)

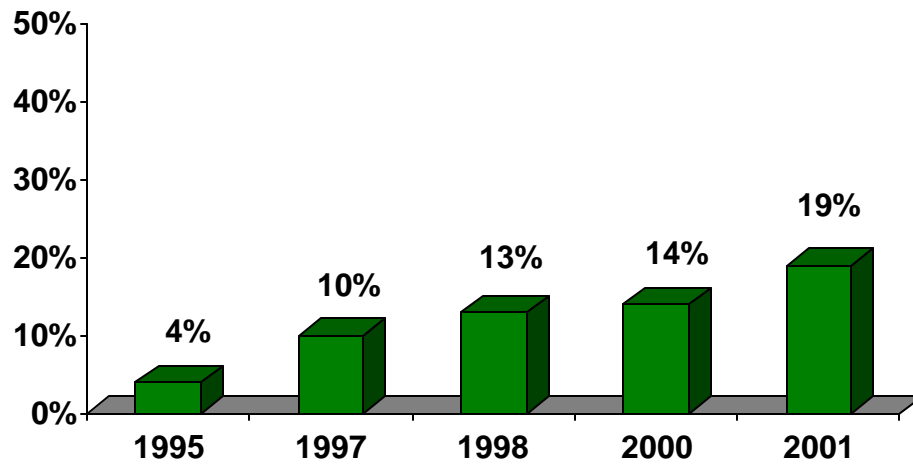


NOTE: Question not asked in 1998.

Folic Acid Knowledge

Women who say they heard or read something about folic acid were asked, unprompted, what they have heard about folic acid. Expressed as a percentage of all women, 19 percent, or about 1 in 5, say that folic acid prevents birth defects.

KNOWLEDGE THAT FOLIC ACID PREVENTS BIRTH DEFECTS
(Based on all women age 18-45)

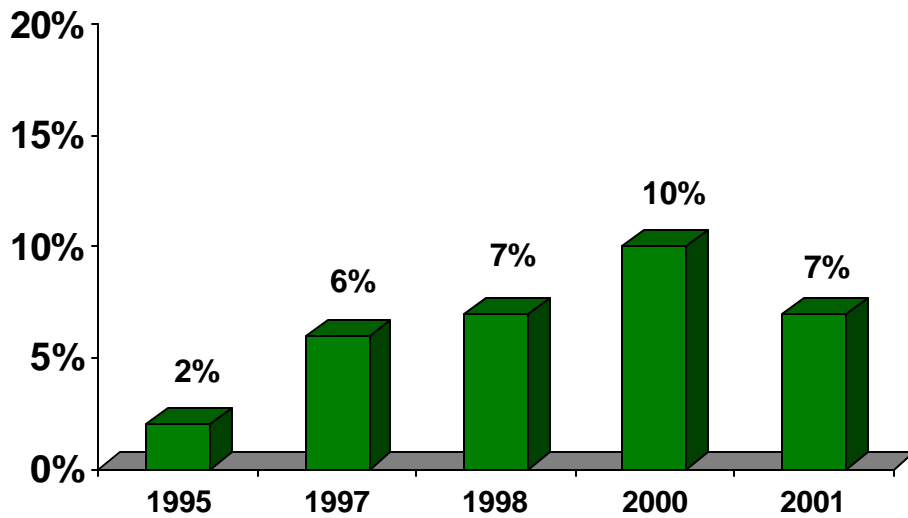


When all “correct” responses are combined and netted, one in four (24 percent) women mention one or more of the following: help prevent birth defects, neural tube defects, and/or help reduce risk of spina bifida.¹ In 2000, the corresponding percentage was 20 percent.

¹ Netted responses not available for 1995-1998.

Unaided awareness that folic acid should be taken before pregnancy has increased from 2 percent in 1995 to 7 percent in 2001. However, between 2000 and 2001 this proportion decreased.

KNOWLEDGE THAT FOLIC ACID SHOULD BE TAKEN BEFORE PREGNANCY
(Based on all women age 18-45)



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Sources of Information

Approximately one-half (48 percent) of women aware of folic acid report learning about folic acid from the media. Print and broadcast media remain the leading sources of information about folic acid (27 percent and 25 percent respectively). As in 2000, at least one in five (22 percent) women aware of folic acid cite health care providers as sources of information about folic acid. These results are summarized below:

