

Overall Quality of Pregnant Woman's Diet Affects Risk for Two Birth Defects

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Stanford University School of Medicine

The overall quality of a pregnant woman's diet is linked with risk for two types of serious birth defects, a new study from the Stanford University School of Medicine. In the study, women who ate better before and during pregnancy gave birth to fewer infants with malformations of the brain and spinal cord, or orofacial clefts, such as cleft lip and cleft palate.



Prior research on diet and birth defects has generally addressed one nutrient at a time. For instance, the B vitamin folic acid has been shown to protect against brain or spinal cord malformations known as neural tube defects, which include anencephaly (a fatal defect in which the brain is lacking) and spina bifida (an opening in the spinal column). However, after fortification of the U.S. food supply with folic acid was implemented in 1998, these types of birth defects did not completely disappear. And other defects, including cleft lip and palate, remained a

concern in the population. So scientists began examining other single-nutrient players in the diet-defect connection.

The new study took a different approach

“Our study showed for the first time that the overall quality of the diet, and not just a single nutrient, matters in terms of reducing the risk of birth defects,” said Suzan Carmichael, PhD, who is the first author of the study and an associate professor of pediatrics. The study was also the first to connect diet quality with reduced risk for cleft lip or cleft palate, she added.

“In the past, we’ve been trying to disentangle a particular nutrient from the composite diet. I think we’re wrong in that approach,” said Gary Shaw, DrPH, professor of pediatrics and the study’s senior author. “It would have been really nice to have the magic bullet against birth defects. Folic acid was the hope for a magic bullet, and it clearly made a difference, but only made some of the difference.” ([περισσότερα...](#))