Folic Acid Intake in Low-Income Pregnant Women
Britney Fletcher

Abstract

Background: Low levels of folate have been linked to an increase in the development of many serious conditions in a wide variety of people. Neural tube defects, such as anencephaly and spina bifida, are serious birth defects of the brain and spinal cord that have been associated with low folate intake during the first few weeks of a pregnancy. The purpose of this study was to explore factors that may influence low-income pregnant women’s decision to increase or not to increase folic acid intake. Research Question: How does pregnancy intendedness, ethnicity, and level of education affect low-income women’s intake of folic acid supplements?

Methods: Secondary data analysis of a study by Fowles that consisted of 134 low-income pregnant women. Folate, through diet and supplemental prenatal vitamins, was measured during the first trimester of pregnancy. Analyses focused on variables that included pregnancy intendedness, ethnicity, and level of education. Further analyses of unexpected variables included the use of food stamps, stress, and depression. Results: Statistical analyses revealed inadequate folate intake but sufficient red blood cell folate levels. Trends were seen favoring increased folate intake in women with intended pregnancies, higher educations, and use of food stamps prior to pregnancy. Intake of folate showed no statistical difference by ethnicity. High stress and depression levels revealed a statistically significant negative influence on folate intake.

Conclusion: Low-income women with unintended pregnancies and high levels of stress and depression are at high risk for inadequate intake of folate. Educational programs that target teenage females most likely to get pregnant, young adults, and college women should be implemented. Access to prenatal care and food stamps early in pregnancy is important for low-income women. Convenient public campaigns for folic acid should be employed in an effort to increase public knowledge of this folic acid for all populations.