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**TELEVISION ADS STRESS IMPORTANCE OF FOLIC ACID IN  
PREVENTING BIRTH DEFECTS**

(RICHMOND, Va.) – This month the Virginia Department of Health (VDH) will air a series of television ads reminding women of the importance of taking folic acid before they become pregnant.

“By taking 400 micrograms of folic acid every day, women can reduce the risk of spina bifida and anencephaly, the two most common neural tube birth defects, by as much as 70 percent,” said State Health Commissioner Robert B. Stroube, M.D., M.P.H.

The ads, whose primary audience is women aged 20-29, will air from March 19 through April 8 in areas of the state that have high rates of neural tube defects and Hispanic populations. These include Bristol, Charlottesville, Harrisonburg, northern Virginia, Norfolk, Richmond and Roanoke. Studies show that Hispanics have high rates of neural tube birth defects.

About 40 children are born each year in Virginia with spina bifida, which is caused when a baby’s spine does not close properly. Approximately 10 children are born in the state each year with anencephaly, which occurs when the brain does not form properly. Because these neural tube birth defects occur during the first few weeks of pregnancy, it is important that all women of childbearing age take a multivitamin containing a minimum of 400 micrograms of folic acid daily.

According to a national survey conducted by the Gallop Organization, 84 percent of women in the United States are aware of folic acid, but only 33 percent take it daily. “We’re happy that women know about folic acid. Now we want them to take the next step and take a multivitamin containing folic acid every day,” Dr. Stroube said.

Since 1999, VDH has worked with the March of Dimes and other organizations to increase consumption of folic acid. The department sponsored television ads for this purpose in 2004 and again in 2005. Also in 2005, 19 of VDH’s health districts distributed approximately 70,400 100-pill bottles of folic acid supplements free to their family planning clients. Health officials have also used journal articles and exhibits at professional meetings and health fairs to teach health care providers and women about the value of folic acid. For more information about folic acid, visit [www.vahealth.org/folicacid](http://www.vahealth.org/folicacid).

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