Possible to avoid late abortion by taking folate

An increasing number of women are requesting late abortion, because of defects in the spinal cord of the fetus. If the women had started to take folate as a dietary supplement earlier, this disease could have been avoided.

During the past decade a total of 321 fetuses have been aborted because they had a so-called neural tube defect.

As many as 73 percent of the fetuses with this defect were aborted in 2008, which is the most recent year when statistics are available. This is the highest figure since 2002.

“We see a dramatic increase in the number of late abortions of fetuses with defects of the spinal cord. Today, abortion is used as “preventive treatment”. We want prevention of the diagnosis, not removal of individuals with the condition. We therefore request a more active campaign for the use of folic acid”, says Guro Fjellanger.

She was previously Minister of The Environment for the Liberal Party (Venstre), and Secretary General for No to the EU (opposing Norwegian membership in EU).

Fjellanger herself was born with spina bifida and is today dependent on a wheel chair.

Defects of the spinal cord in the fetus can be prevented by the intake of folic acid, a vitamin B, which is found in several vegetables and legumes (peas, beans etc.). However, it is not enough just to take a dietary supplement when pregnancy starts. Since 1998, The Health Directorate has recommended women to take folic acid while they are trying to become pregnant.

Even so, the number of cases of neural tube defects has not diminished. While 66 percent take dietary supplement after becoming pregnant, only one in four of the mothers used folic acid before the pregnancy.

“The authorities have launched information campaigns, but we still see that too few take folate for long enough and in the correct dose”, says Fjellanger.

She would like better information and thinks that a wide approach is needed:

- To school children in connection with instruction about contraception.
- When ovulation tests are carried out in those hoping to become pregnant.
- In social media and on the Internet.

WAS INFORMED
Håvard Kristiansen holds around his pregnant wife, Olga Kristiansen. She started to take folic acid supplement as soon as she knew that she was pregnant.
“But then I was already 12 weeks pregnant, so I have not taken it for as long as I perhaps should”, she says.

Kristiansen knows that it pays to take this dietary supplement even during the planning phase of a pregnancy.

“My doctor also informed me that it was a good idea to take this before the pregnancy started. If we have more children, I will do this”, she smiles.

**INCREASED RISK OF CANCER**

Many feel that they have chosen to have an abortion on false premises.

“This is a pity when it is possible to prevent many things by early intake of a dietary supplement”, says Eli Skattebu, the General Manager of the Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus Association in Norway. Folate is also present in our normal diet. Spinach, broccoli and beans are amongst the foodstuffs that are full of folic acid. However, Guro Fjellanger thinks that one has to be extremely interested in diet to consume the necessary amount of folic acid in a natural way.

“And fortification of food is not a relevant policy in Norway”, she says. However, not everyone thinks that use of folate is healthy. In several investigations it has been shown that a supplement of folic acid may cause an increased incidence of cancer. Eli Skattebu considers that too high doses were often used in these studies. She points out that folic acid should not be used over long periods.

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**NEURAL TUBE DEFECTS**

- The neural tube includes the brain and the spinal cord. During the first two to three weeks of fetal life, the neural tube is formed as a plate. Four weeks after fertilization the plate becomes a tube. The front part becomes the brain and the part furthest back becomes the upper part of the spinal cord. After just over 30 days the neural tube is closed.
- Neural tube defects are serious, congenital malformations caused by disturbance in the closing of the neural tube. Hereditary factors, folate deficiency and other environmental factors may play a part.
- Spina bifida is the commonest neural tube defect, about 50% of the cases. In spina bifida, the neural tube has not closed. The degree of severity varies from mild functional disturbance to severe paralysis combined with lack of control over urine and bowel function.

*Photo caption: Olga Kristiansen, in an advanced stage of pregnancy. She has taken folate since she discovered that she was pregnant. She was then already 12 weeks pregnant. Here with her husband Håvard Kristiansen.*

ESTER NORDLAND-TRINE ANDREASSEN-MIMSY MØLLER