Prevention in a Pill: Help Choosing the Right Prenatal Vitamin

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It's National Birth Defects Prevention Month, and you've found yourself here – standing in the pharmacy aisle in search of prenatal vitamins. You think, "I should start taking one of these if I want to have a baby, right? At least that's what I've heard…" Your eyes are swimming and head is spinning with all the options. "Should I choose the old-fashioned tablets, the fruit-flavored gummies, or the minty chewables? With DHA or without? Do I need extra calcium or vitamin D? Is 200% daily value better than 100%? This seems like a good one," you think to yourself. "Oh wait! Maybe this one is better…" Shelf after shelf of bottles of vitamins and supplements…but which one is right for you?

Give yourself a pat on the back.

First of all – well done, Mama! You've already made the most important decision by choosing to kick off your pregnancy journey with a solid supply of vitamins to support a growing baby! But why are prenatal vitamins so important anyway? Well, one of the main reasons is that deficiency of a vitamin called folate (also called folic acid) in very early pregnancy increases the risk for neural tube defects. Neural tube defects are a group of birth defects in which there is an opening in the spine. They include things like spina bifida. While the other vitamins and minerals may also provide benefits to mom and baby, the folic acid in the prenatal multivitamin is one of the most important for birth defect prevention. Taking folic acid prior to and during pregnancy is the best thing we can do to reduce the risk of neural tube defects.

Take a deep breath.

As a prenatal genetic counselor, I've had many patients ask me which prenatal vitamin is the best. While there are, of course, many factors that go into making a decision about which prenatal vitamin to take including cost considerations and personal preferences, I'm here to give some thoughts from a medical professional's perspective. First of all, you may not even have to make this choice yourself. Your doctor may prescribe you a prenatal vitamin with folic acid, so check with her first. But if she tells you to pick something up over the counter, don't panic.

Check the ingredients and their doses.

The exact vitamins and minerals that you, personally, will need in a multivitamin depends on a few things. One is whether you have any known vitamin or mineral deficiencies or risk factors for such a deficiency. For example, vegans and vegetarians are more likely to have deficiency of vitamin B12, a vitamin found in meat and other animal products. The amounts of vitamins and minerals you receive through your diet should be considered. It is common for women to need extra help getting the recommended amounts of calcium, iron, and vitamin D. The daily recommended intakes for pregnant women over 18 years are 1,000 mg (milligrams) of calcium, 27 mg of iron, and 600 IU (International Units) of vitamin D. Some health care providers will also suggest docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) supplementation of 200 mg per day for those who do not eat fatty fish (like salmon and tuna) at least twice a week.

Regardless of your diet, folic acid supplementation is a must. The natural form of the vitamin found in certain foods (called folate) is not as well absorbed as the supplemental form (folic acid). Because of this, the U.S. Public Health Service recommends that all women of childbearing age take a folic acid supplement of 400 micrograms (0.4 mg) per day. Once you become pregnant, this dosage increases to 600 micrograms (0.6 mg) per day. If you are at higher risk for neural tube defects than the average woman because of family history or another factor, an even higher dosage may be recommended. You should consult with your health care provider for her recommendation.

With vitamins, more is not always better, though. While some vitamins are unlikely to be harmful even if taken at high dosages in pregnancy, this is not true for all. Specifically, very large amounts of supplemental vitamin A have the potential to increase the risk of birth defects and intellectual disabilities. For this reason, it is recommended that vitamin A supplementation not exceed 10,000 IU per day.

Don’t go too far off the beaten path.

Unlike medications and foods, vitamins and supplements are not regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). This means that the FDA does not test vitamins and other supplements to ensure that they contain the ingredients written on their labels at the doses indicated. The FDA also does not test for contamination with other, potentially harmful ingredients in vitamins and supplements. It is the responsibility of those who make the vitamins to perform these types of tests to ensure quality and safety.
Does this mean that most vitamins are dangerous? No, but it does mean that it may be safer to choose a widely available multivitamin rather than one produced by a small, specialized manufacturer. Companies with wider distribution are under more pressure to produce a safe product than those whose products you may only be able to buy in a specialty store or through their website. If in doubt, speak with your healthcare provider or a pharmacist.

Choose what works for you.

While perhaps the most obvious point, choosing a vitamin that you will actually take is arguably the most important one as well. The perfect multivitamin won’t do you any good if it is gathering dust in the medicine cabinet. If even just the thought of swallowing a pill half the size of a golf ball every morning has you queasy, you could consider trying a liquid or chewable form. Iron in your prenatal vitamin giving you constipation? Ask your health care provider if it’s necessary that you have iron supplementation if you receive adequate amounts through the foods that you eat.

So if you find yourself in the pharmacy aisle overwhelmed with all the multivitamin options, try not to stress! Remember these tips and save that energy for other difficult decisions down the road…like choosing a preschool!



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MotherToBaby** is a service of the international Organization of Teratology Information Specialists (OTIS), a suggested resource by many agencies including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). If you have questions about alcohol, medications, vaccines, diseases, or other exposures, call MotherToBaby toll-FREE at 866-626-6847 or try out MotherToBaby’s **new text counseling service** by texting questions to (855) 999-3525. You can also visit **MotherToBaby.org** to browse a library of fact sheets.

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