

## Choline

# Research backs prenatal nutrient; policymakers should act quickly

By Robert Freedman, M. Camille Hoffman and Sharon K. Hunter  
Guest Commentary

Preventing birth defects by including folic acid in prenatal vitamins is a crowning achievement of preventive medicine and public health. For pennies per diem, babies today are born free of spinal cord and facial problems that otherwise would result in lifelong disability and disfigurement. It took decades for folic acid to move from research labs to universal acceptance in maternal care; now another prenatal nutrient, choline, is traveling that path.

Evidence supporting the benefits of choline supplementation for mothers and babies comes from research laboratories at the CU School of Medicine, the Institute of Children's Mental Health and other labs worldwide. The potential benefits — and associated economic savings — of higher prenatal choline levels on child development are considerable, starting with lower rates of preterm birth and fewer low-birth-weight babies.

Because choline does not require a prescription, its cost — as little as \$200 per pregnancy — is not reimbursed by public or private insurance. Because many mothers cannot afford to pay this, policymakers need to consider whether choline, as other prenatal vitamins are, should be included in Medicaid and other insurance reimbursement programs.

The money saved by reducing the number of preterm births and the incidence of mental health problems in childhood could justify the low cost of covering choline. We believe it does.

Preterm birth, defined as three weeks or more before full gestation, increases neonatal morbidity and mortality and requires expensive hospital care for premature newborns.

We found that rates of preterm birth for Black women are markedly higher and related to their having lower choline blood levels than most other women. Choline is necessary for mechanisms in the placenta to form early in preg-

nancy that will delay labor at the end of pregnancy until the baby is mature. Supplements raise the mothers' choline levels and enable women of all racial and ethnic groups to deliver mature babies with normal birth weight on time.

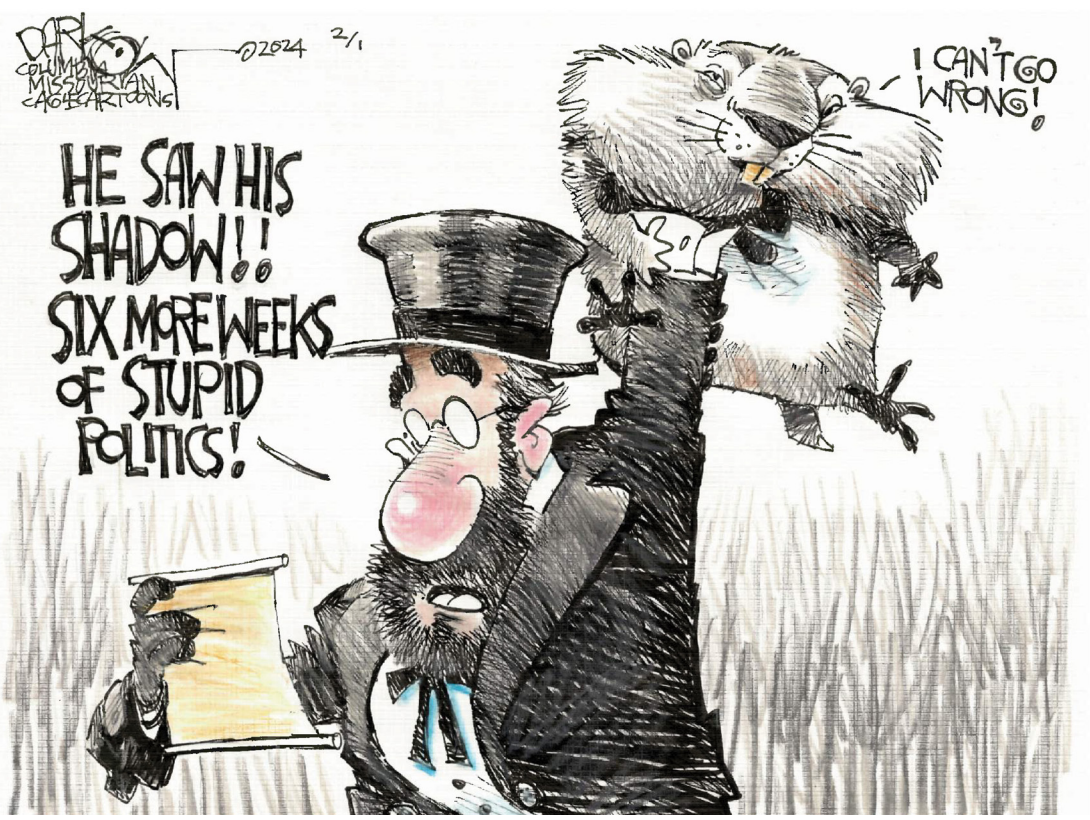
The benefit of the addition of choline supplements to standard prenatal vitamins continues into childhood. Encouragingly, children benefiting from choline supplementation have demonstrated improved concentration and attention spans. They bond and cuddle with their parents more readily, and they relate better to others. These benefits have been documented through early school-age years.

As a natural nutrient, no serious side effects from choline supplements have been found in clinical trials. Choline, like folic acid, is naturally found in many foods, including liver, salmon, red meat and eggs. Other sources include soybeans and sunflower seeds, which are used for choline tablets, capsules and drops. Dietary surveys find that more than half of U.S. women fail to meet the FDA's recommended daily intake of 550 mg during pregnancy. Choline is recommended by the FDA before birth, but after delivery the opportunity to improve birth outcomes and in-utero brain development has passed.

A founding principle of our country is that all people are created equal. Children born prematurely, with low birth weight, and a higher risk for mental illness confront inequality from their first day of life. Choline supplements, as part of good maternal care, can help make equality a reality. Hopefully, choline can reach all mothers and babies sooner than folic acid did, before decades of children are born without its benefit.

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## Cartoonist's take



JOHN DARKOW (COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN), CAGLECARTOONS.COM

## The Open Forum

### Social Security's seemingly impenetrable red tape

Re: "Social Security: If agency overpays, then recipients on hook for billions," Jan. 28 news story

I was dismayed, but it felt somewhat good to read that I was not alone when I saw all the people and dollars affected by the Social Security Administration's overpayments. I, too, received a notice I had been overpaid and owed money. I tried multiple times in person at a Social Security office to find out over what time period, how that number was arrived at and why it happened. It is very disconcerting that no one at the agency knows that information. I asked for a review and the same number was arrived at, despite my account and the tax forms I've received having different totals for how much I've received over the years and neither matching the bill I received. I was told, "Those numbers don't matter."

Also, those who were interviewed for the article seemed to be SSI or SSDI recipients. I'm just a regular retiree receiving my earned amount. So the problem appears to be pervasive in the whole agency. I do agree with the woman who said, "It makes me paranoid." I wonder if I can trust any number that I'm told is my monthly

payment.

I think it would be very important for Congress to look into this and provide either legislation or investigation or both to address this very troubling issue.

— Ellen Staton, Castle Rock

### More corporate apologies are needed

Re: "Social media CEOs testify about dangers kids face," Feb. 1 news story

As one who believes in personal and corporate responsibility, it was good to see social media CEOs apologize for their products having caused families harm and promising to exert more control over how their products are used. U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham told Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg, "You have blood on your hands." I hope he will say that to the gun manufacturers next and pass legislation to control their products.

— Stephan Papa, Denver

### More public control over utility is "worth the effort"

Re: "Xcel seeking rate increase for natural gas customers," Feb. 1 news story

Xcel is yet again asking to raise the price of natural gas. Although there is a degree of state control over pricing, the Public Utility Commission is packed with energy industry

supporters and generally has backed Xcel's wishes with a few exceptions. Natural gas is our most essential means of heating homes and businesses. Wind and solar have made inroads in generating electricity, but gas-fired plants still are needed to meet growing demand.

There is no commodity that should belong more under public control, yet it remains privately owned and exported for corporate shareholder profit. Such are the mechanics of a capitalist economy, but moderating policies are democratically possible, an uphill battle no doubt but worth the effort.

— Robert Porath, Boulder

### What we can expect from another Trump defeat

Re: "Comparing Trump's words on Jan. 6 to Civil War 'laughable,'" Jan. 7 letter to the editor

The letter writer says, "Voting for the other guy is not enough for the radical left." May I respectfully remind the writer that more votes for the other guy were not enough for Donald Trump and his MAGA base in 2020? That is the problem. If Trump is on the ballot in 2024 and loses again, does anyone really think he will graciously concede, congratulate his opponent, and quietly go away?

— Sharon Winningham, Denver

## Election 2024

# Threat of third-party presidential candidacy is worrisome

By Gail Collins  
The New York Times

Think I have something good to report, people. No, it's not about how to get your kids Taylor Swift tickets in Tokyo.

My news is that Dean Phillips is not going to run as a third-party candidate for president.

"No! No!" he assured me when I asked him the big question this week.

OK, you're thinking that you've had more thrilling news from the grocer on banana prices. But follow along for a minute.

Phillips is a representative from Minnesota who campaigned energetically in the New Hampshire presidential primary. People there were a tad piqued by the Democrats' decision to move the first official party vote to South Carolina. Despite all that rancor, Phillips, who, unlike President Joe Biden, was on the ballot, got about 24,000 votes to Biden's nearly 80,000 write-ins.

But he's marching on. "Look at the data," he said. (I discovered during our phone interview that Phillips says "look at the data" a lot.) "I'm from the business world. It's time to come out with a new product."

If you want to run for president and it doesn't look as if your party is going to nominate you, you have two real choices. You can do what Phillips is doing: keep competing in the primaries and hope voters will embrace your message. Or you can get yourself on the ballot in November as a third-party candidate.

We've already got several people taking that last option. So far, fortunately, they don't exactly look like major contenders. It's everyone from vaccine vigilante Robert F. Kennedy Jr. to Chase Oliver, a candidate for the Libertarian line who won about 2% of the votes in the 2022 Senate race in Georgia.

But the third-party threat is always worrisome when it comes to messing things up, especially when elections are close. We're still haunted by the saga of 2000, when Al Gore was pitted against George W. Bush. Ralph Nader made one of those principled third-party runs. Remember? Everything came down to Florida, which Bush won by 537 votes while Nader got nearly 100,000 — most of which undoubtedly would have gone to Gore otherwise.

Nader is now nearly 90, and he largely has dismissed the idea of third-party challenges in

2024 and supports Biden over Donald Trump. Excellent choice. But I still haven't forgiven him.

Awhile ago Phillips sounded as if he might be taking the old Nader route. He opted instead to run in the primaries, arguing he'd be a better Democratic nominee than Biden. He certainly would be different. Although our current president is a lifelong pol, Phillips spent most of his career as a businessman and was once a co-owner of the nation's bestselling packaged gelato.

"Someone has to do this," he told me when we talked about his primary campaign.

And he's having a good time. Really good. "Oh my God, it's the most exciting, reinvigorating, energetic and joyful experience of my life," he said. "People have been remarkably, almost shockingly friendly."

Send out some good thoughts to Phillips, please. If only there were more people following his lead — talented Democratic officeholders such as Gov. Gavin Newsom of California and Gov. Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan, or high-achieving members of Congress.

Wow, imagine the great race the Democrats could have if Biden, 81, decided he was step-

ping down. It'd be further evidence he was a terrific president. So eager to remember him as a terrific president.

But if the choice winds up being Biden vs. Trump, a third-party candidate could get just enough votes to screw up the outcome.

"I don't think anybody has ever won as a third-party presidential candidate," said Bernard Tamas, an elections expert who teaches at Valdosta State University in Georgia. "Unless you count Lincoln."

Third parties, he added, often just use running for president "as a way of forcing issues onto the table," like the Green Party has been doing for years. The Green Party pursues important environmental causes, and that was its mission in 2016, when its presidential candidate, Jill Stein, won enough votes in Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin to cost Hillary Rodham Clinton the White House.

Leave this to the primaries. You don't want to go down in history as the progressive candidate whose third-party run drained just enough votes from Biden to put Trump back in the White House. (Looking at you, Corneli West.)

Unfortunately, getting on a

primary ballot isn't always easy. Phillips is in court fighting a decision by Wisconsin Democratic Party leaders that he wasn't a serious enough contender to deserve a slot.

He still can get on by collecting signatures but estimates that would cost him about \$300,000. Hardly impossible for the guy who made a fortune in gelato alone, but still.

And then there are the dreaded No Labels people, who have a slot on the ballot in several states and might give Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia its line. Now the idea of Manchin as president is pretty terrifying, but in the real world, the most No Labels could do is take votes from Biden.

"No Labels is a dead end," Tamas told me. "In terms of actually changing policies, I think they've accomplished nothing."

Here's the bottom line: If you hope to be president, run for a major party nomination. Otherwise, there's always 2028.

Gail Collins joined The New York Times in 1995 as a member of the editorial board and later as a columnist. In 2001, she was appointed editorial page editor — the first woman to hold that post at The Times.