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The National Women's Health Information Center

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Frequently Asked Questions about Folic Acid

What is folic acid?

Folic acid is one of the B vitamins. *Folate*, the natural form of folic acid, is found in orange juice, other citrus fruits and juices, leafy green vegetables, beans, peanuts, broccoli, asparagus, peas, lentils and whole grain products. Synthetic (manufactured) folic acid is added to certain grain products, including flour, rice, pasta, cornmeal, bread and cereals. These foods are considered “fortified” with folic acid. There also are multivitamin pills that contain folic acid.

Why is folic acid important for women?

Taking the synthetic form of folic acid can help prevent birth defects called *neural tube defects (NTDs)*. NTDs are defects of the spine and brain. NTDs take place in the first month after conception, before most women know they are pregnant. The two most common forms of NTDs are *spina bifida* and *anencephaly*. Babies born with spina bifida may be paralyzed or have many other problems. Babies with anencephaly do not develop a brain or have only a partial brain. These babies die before birth or soon after they are born. Up to 70 percent of NTDs can be prevented by taking folic acid before and during early pregnancy. Because the risk for NTDs is not totally eliminated by using folic acid, routine prenatal visits with a health care provider during pregnancy are still important.

Although it is not proven, folic acid also might help prevent heart disease, stroke, and colon cancer, and other kinds of cancer. Recent research suggests it also might help prevent high blood pressure during pregnancy.

How much folic acid should women take?

All women who are capable of becoming pregnant should take 400 micrograms (0.4 milligrams) of the synthetic form of folic acid every day. The best way to do this is to take a daily multivitamin pill that contains this amount of folic acid. The Institute of Medicine also recommends:

- An increase in your daily intake of folic acid to 600 micrograms per day, once your pregnancy is confirmed
- 500 micrograms of folic acid daily for women who are breastfeeding
- 4000 micrograms of folic acid daily for women who have had a previous NTD-affected pregnancy (starting one month before the time they plan to become pregnant and throughout the first three months of pregnancy). During times when these high-risk women are not planning pregnancy, they should have 400 micrograms of folic acid per day.

It is recommended that you do not take more than 1 mg (1,000 micrograms) of folic acid daily. This is because a high intake of folic acid may hide a deficiency of vitamin B12. Many older people have vitamin B12 deficiency. However, folic acid is not toxic if you happen to take more than the recommended amount.

The Institute of Medicine also recommends that women eat a diet rich in foods that contain folate or folic acid. Check the labels on your food to find out the amount of folic acid it contains. And remember that the body more easily absorbs folic acid from vitamin supplements and fortified foods than it does folate from food.

For more information...

You can find out more about folic acid by contacting the National Women's Health Information Center (NWHIC) (800) 994-WOMAN (9662) or the following organizations:

National Center for Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities

Phone Number(s): (888) 232-6789

Internet Address: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/folicacid/>

Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition

Phone Number(s): (888) 723-3366

Internet Address: <http://www.cfsan.fda.gov>

March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation

Phone Number(s): (888) 663-4637

Internet Address: <http://www.modimes.org>

Spina Bifida Association of America

Phone Number(s): (800) 621-3141

Internet Address: <http://www.sbaa.org/index.shtml>

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