

Folic acid



One of life's
essentials



What are folate and folic acid?

Folate is a B vitamin that occurs naturally in the foods we eat every day. Foods which contain folate include: broccoli, Brussel sprouts, spinach, peas, chickpeas and fortified breakfast cereals.

Folic acid is the manufactured form and helps the body produce healthy red blood cells. It is added to some foods such as bread and breakfast cereals. This will be shown on the list of ingredients and may also be noted on the nutritional information on the label.

Folic acid is also available as a vitamin supplement from your local pharmacy, major supermarkets and health food stores.



Why do I need a folic acid supplement?

Folic acid helps to protect your unborn baby against conditions such as spina bifida. Spina bifida can affect babies in different ways. For example, it may mean that they will be unable to walk or control their bladders. Spina bifida is one of the neural tube defects (NTDs) that can occur when the baby's spine or brain do not develop in the normal way.

Research has shown that by eating food rich in folate and taking extra folic acid you can reduce the risk of your baby being affected by an NTD by approximately 70%.



How much do I need?

It's recommended that you take a supplement of 400 micrograms (400µg) folic acid as soon as you start trying for a baby (ideally for 3 months before) and during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy. This will help your baby's brain and spine to develop normally.

A lot of women know when they would like to have a baby. However, a high percentage of pregnancies are unplanned, so even if you are not planning to have a baby right now, it is important to be aware of the benefits of taking a folic acid supplement.

Who is at risk from having a baby with an NTD?

If you're planning a baby, or if you could become pregnant, it's important you take folic acid:

- whatever your age;
- even if you're in good health;
- whether it's your first baby or you already have a child without an NTD;
- even if there is no family history of NTDs such as spina bifida.

How do I get the right amount of folate and folic acid?

You need up to 10 times more folate in pregnancy to help your baby grow. It is hard to get enough folate from food alone to protect your baby against NTDs. For example, you would need to eat 4 to 5 portions (360g) of Brussels sprouts every day!

To make sure you're getting enough to protect your baby, you should:

- take a 400 microgram (400µg) folic acid supplement every day (if you're unsure which one to buy, ask your pharmacist)

and

- eat more foods rich in folate, eg broccoli, brussels sprouts, spinach, peas and chickpeas.



and

- eat breads and breakfast cereals which have added folic acid - check the label

Folic acid is generally very safe. Taking too much is unlikely to cause any harm.

If you're worried, speak to your pharmacist or doctor.

When is the right time to begin taking extra folic acid?

You should take supplements of folic acid before you become pregnant and continue until the end of the 12th week of your pregnancy.

Even if you do not become pregnant for a while, taking folic acid cannot harm you. Your body automatically gets rid of any extra in your urine.

What if I am already pregnant?

If you find out that you are pregnant and haven't been taking the supplement, it's still worthwhile to start taking folic acid and to keep taking it until the end of the 12th week of pregnancy. If you are more than 12 weeks pregnant, try not to worry – most babies are born without an NTD.

Where can I get the supplements?

Folic acid supplements are easy to swallow tablets. They cost between 1p and 4p a day and you can buy them from pharmacies, major supermarkets and health food shops. Folic acid supplements are available free of charge via the Healthy Start Scheme to those who are eligible, see www.healthystart.nhs.uk

How do I take the supplements?

You can take folic acid with or without food. Swallow the tablets whole with a drink of water.

If you have been prescribed folic acid as a liquid, use the plastic syringe or measuring spoon to help you measure out the right dose. A standard teaspoon won't give you enough.

Is 400 micrograms (400µg) enough for everyone?

The 400µg dose is enough for most people. However, if you have diabetes, epilepsy or if there is a history of NTDs such as spina bifida in your family, you will need to take a higher dose of 5 milligrams (5mg). If you are taking antiretroviral medication for HIV, or if you have sickle cell disease, you should take a 5mg supplement too. There is also some evidence that women who are living with overweight or obesity (BMI of 30 or more) may need this higher dose of folic acid. Folic acid 5mg tablets will be prescribed by your doctor if you need them.

For more information about the benefits of taking folic acid, ask your doctor or pharmacist.



Public Health Agency

12-22 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BS.

Tel: 0300 555 0114 (local rate).

www.publichealth.hscni.net

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