

FOLIC ACID

Take folic acid before you're pregnant

Folic acid is B vitamin that every cell in your body needs for normal growth and development. If women of childbearing age take 400 micrograms of folic acid every day before and during early pregnancy, it may help reduce their baby's risk for birth defects of the brain and spine called neural tube defects (NTDs). The neural tube is the part of a developing baby that becomes the brain and spinal cord. An NTD can happen when the neural tube doesn't close completely.

About 3,000 pregnancies are affected by NTDs each year in the United States. If all women take 400 micrograms of folic acid every day before getting pregnant and during early pregnancy, it may help reduce the number of pregnancies affected by NTDs by up to 70 percent. Some studies show that folic acid also may help prevent heart defects in a baby and birth defects in a baby's mouth called cleft lip and palate.

Who should take folic acid?

All women, even if they're not trying to get pregnant, should take folic acid. Folic acid helps prevent NTDs only if taken before pregnancy and during the first few weeks of pregnancy, often before a woman may even know she's pregnant. Because nearly half of all pregnancies in the United States are unplanned, it's important that all women take folic acid every day.

How can you get folic acid?

Before pregnancy, take a multivitamin that has 400 micrograms of folic acid in it every day. Most multivitamins have this amount, but check the label to be sure. During pregnancy, take a prenatal vitamin each day that has 600 micrograms of folic acid in it. Your health care provider can prescribe a prenatal vitamin for you. You can also get prenatal vitamins over the counter without a prescription. Most women don't need more than 1,000 micrograms of folic acid each day. But some women, like those who've had a pregnancy affected by NTDs or women with sickle cell disease, may need more. Talk to your provider to make sure you get the right amount.

Can you get folic acid from food?

Yes. Some flour, breads, cereals and pasta have folic acid added to them. Look for "fortified" or "enriched" on the package to know if the product has folic acid in it. Even if you eat fortified or enriched foods, be sure to keep taking your multivitamin or prenatal vitamin with folic acid. You also can get folic acid from some fruits and vegetables. When folic acid is naturally in a food, it's called folate. Foods that are good sources of folate are:

- Beans, like lentils, pinto beans and black beans
- Leafy green vegetables, like spinach and Romaine lettuce
- Asparagus
- Broccoli
- Peanuts (But don't eat them if you have a peanut allergy)
- Citrus fruits, like oranges and grapefruit
- Orange juice (From concentrate is best)

What other benefits does folic acid have?

Folic acid plays an important role in helping your body make red blood cells. Red blood cells are important because they carry oxygen from your lungs to all parts of your body. Some studies show that folic acid may help protect you from heart disease. Scientists are still learning about all the benefits of folic acid.