

Healthy Beginnings — Folic Acid

HOW CAN THIS VITAMIN HELP ME HAVE A HEALTHY BABY?

Folate is a B vitamin, naturally found in food, that plays an important role in cell division and the synthesis of amino acids and nucleic acids like DNA.

Folic acid is the synthetic compound used in dietary supplements and food fortification.

One very important function of folic acid is that it helps prevent birth defects of the spinal cord and brain called neural tube defects (NTDs).

Each year, one in 700 babies in Ontario is born with an NTD such as spina bifida. These defects occur between the third and fourth week of fetal development before many women realize they are pregnant.

WHEN SHOULD I TAKE IT?

The critical time to ensure that you are getting enough folic acid is before you get pregnant. The benefit of folic acid occurs primarily four to six weeks prior to conception and through the first three months of pregnancy.

To reduce the risk of having a baby with an NTD, all women who could become pregnant should consume 0.6 mg of folic acid every day.

ENJOY FOODS RICH IN FOLIC ACID, SUCH AS;

- green leafy vegetables
- legumes (dried peas & beans)
- nuts and seeds
- orange juice
- whole grain breads & cereals

Food is not enough. Research shows that a reduced risk of babies born with NTDs was only found in women who took a supplement of folic acid combined with a diet high in folate.

WHAT ABOUT SUPPLEMENTS?

Although folic acid is found in vegetables, fruits, grain products, beans and lentils, it is difficult to get all you need from food.

In order to get the required daily intake of 0.6 mg you should take a 0.4 mg folic acid supplement every day and eat foods rich in folic acid. Folic acid is available as a single supplement or as part of a multi-vitamin preparation. It is recommended to take a multivitamin containing vitamin B12 as well as folic acid. Ask a dietitian, pharmacist or doctor for the best choice. It is not recommended to take doses higher than 1 mg of folic acid per day unless prescribed by your doctor.

If you have diabetes, obesity or epilepsy, you may be at higher risk of having a baby with a NTD. See your doctor or health practitioner before planning your pregnancy.

If you start taking a prenatal supplement you will be getting all the folic acid you need. So, you won't need to take the other supplement as well.

If you have already had a child with a NTD, your requirement for folic acid is higher for future pregnancies. Consult with your doctor.

All women who could become pregnant should take a daily vitamin supplement containing 0.4 mg of folic acid as well as including folate rich foods in your diet. Ensure your supplement contains vitamin B12.

Tasty Ways to Enjoy Folic Acid

LENTIL SOUP

1 cup (250mL)	lentils
5 cups (1250mL)	chicken broth
2 cups (500mL)	water
1½ cups (375mL)	potato, diced
1½ cups (375mL)	onion, chopped
1 28 oz can (796mL)	tomatoes, chopped
2 medium	carrots, grated
½ tsp (2mL)	basil, dried
2 tbsp (25mL)	flour
2 tbsp (25mL)	cold water
	salt & pepper to taste

Wash and drain lentils. In a saucepan, add lentils to chicken broth. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat, cover and simmer 30 minutes. Add potato and onion. Simmer 20 minutes. Add tomatoes, carrot and basil. Simmer 10 minutes. Blend together salt and pepper, flour and water. Gradually add to soup while stirring, until thickened. Serves 6.

KEEP FOLIC ACID IN YOUR FOOD

The way you prepare, store and cook food can greatly affect the amount of folic acid in your food. To prevent the loss of folic acid from your food:

- Store in tightly covered containers in the refrigerator.
- Peel and chop vegetables and fruit just before cooking.
- Cook or steam your food in small amounts of water for as short a time as possible.
- Serve vegetables and fruit raw more often.
- When stir-frying, use the highest heat so that vegetables start cooking right away.

CITRUS SPINACH SALAD

1-2 tbsp (15-30 mL)	lime juice
2 tbsp (30mL)	oil
1 tsp (5 mL)	sesame seeds
1/2 tsp (2mL)	lime peel, grated
1/4 tsp (1mL)	ginger
3 cups (750 mL)	torn spinach
1 cup (250mL)	sliced mushrooms
1 cup (250mL)	orange, sectioned
1/2	red onion, sliced rings
	salt & pepper to taste

In a jar with a tight fitting lid, combine lime juice, oil, sesame seeds, lime peel, ginger, salt and pepper. Shake well. Refrigerate until serving. In a large bowl, combine spinach, mushrooms, oranges and onion. Toss with the dressing. Serves 4.

FOODS HIGH IN FOLIC ACID

Food	Amount	Folic Acid
Fruits and Vegetables		
green or yellow beans	1 cup	0.1—0.2 mg
broccoli	1/2 cup	0.1—0.2 mg
spinach (cooked)	1/2 cup	0.1—0.2 mg
brussel sprouts	1 cup	0.1—0.2 mg
cauliflower	1 cup	0.1—0.2 mg
vegetable cocktail	1 cup	0.05—0.1 mg
orange juice	1/2 cup	0.1—0.2 mg
cantaloupe	1/2 cup	0.05—0.1 mg
strawberries	1 cup	0.1—0.2 mg
asparagus (cooked)	1 cup	0.1—0.2 mg
peas (frozen)	1 cup	0.05—0.1 mg
Grain Products		
all bran cereal	1/2 cup	0.043 mg
whole wheat bread	2 slices	0.05 ,g
wheat germ	3 tbsp.	0.1 mg
quinoa	1/2 cup	0.75 mg
Meat & Alternatives		
lentils (cooked)	1 cup	0.4 mg
pinto beans (cooked)	1 cup	0.3 mg
kidney beans	1 cup	0.2 mg
baked beans	1 cup	0.1—0.2 mg
chick peas	1 cup	0.3 mg
peanuts	1/2 cup	0.1 mg
sunflower seeds	1/2 cup	0.1—0.2 mg