

Folic acid



One of life's
essentials



Did you know?

If you are a woman of child-bearing age and are sexually active, even if you are not trying for a baby, you should take a supplement of 400 micrograms (400µg) of folic acid every day.

A lot of women know when they would like to have a baby. However, even if you are not planning a baby right now, it is important to be aware of the benefits of folate and folic acid.

Taking folic acid before you become pregnant can help protect your unborn baby from conditions such as spina bifida.

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: peas, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, parsnips, broccoli and oranges.

In its manufactured form, it is called folic acid and this 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 and some supermarkets.





Folic acid - why is it important?

Folic acid can help 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.

Neural tube defects are higher in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the UK. 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%.

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

In Northern Ireland, approximately two babies a month are born with an NTD. So, 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 healthy children;
- 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?

It is hard to get enough folate from food alone to protect your baby against NTDs. For example, you would need to eat over 500g (1¼lb) 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 peas, cabbage, parsnips, broccoli and oranges



and

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

from before you become pregnant until the end of the 12th week of pregnancy.

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

Supplements of folic acid should be taken before you become pregnant and for the first 12 weeks of your pregnancy.

Even if you do not become pregnant for a while, or are not even planning to become pregnant, 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, health food shops and some supermarkets. You may be able to get folic acid supplements on prescription.

Is 400 micrograms (400µg) enough for everyone?

The 400µg dose is enough for most people. But 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). There is also some evidence that women who are very overweight or obese (BMI of 30 or more) may need this higher dose of folic acid. Ask your doctor or pharmacist.

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



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