

## **Folic Acid**

### **Did you know?**

Your baby's brain, skull and spine form during the first few weeks of pregnancy, before you even know you are expecting! For the brain and spinal cord to form properly, you must have enough of a B vitamin called Folic Acid.

If you don't have enough Folic Acid in your diet, it can result in serious birth defects of the baby's brain, skull and spine called neural tube defects (NTDs). The most common NTD is a serious birth defect called spina bifida, which is a failure of the spine to close properly.

Good or excellent sources of Folic Acid include dark green vegetables (broccoli, spinach, peas and brussels sprouts), corn, dried peas, beans, lentils, oranges and orange juice. Other good sources include lentils, peanuts, corn, beets, peas and beans, berries, sunflower seeds, oranges and orange juice. You can also get Folic Acid from enriched breads and pasta and fortified breakfast cereals.

Women who are or could become pregnant need 0.4 mg of Folic Acid daily. But it's hard to get enough every day through food alone. You and your baby need a Folic Acid supplement too. All women who could become pregnant should take a multivitamin containing 0.4 mg of Folic Acid every day. To help reduce the risk of NTDs, you should start taking a supplement at least three months before getting pregnant and continue throughout the first three months of your pregnancy.

### **Planning on getting pregnant? Be prepared!**

If you have had a previous NTD-affected pregnancy, or have a family history of this problem, talk to your doctor. You may need a higher dosage of Folic Acid to ensure the best health for you and your baby. If you have diabetes, are obese or have epilepsy, you may be at higher risk of having a baby with NTD, and you should see your doctor before planning your pregnancy.

### **For more information:**

Public Health Agency of Canada's Folic Acid Program

<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/fa-af/index.html>

Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating

[http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hpfb-dgpsa/onpp-bppn/food\\_guide\\_rainbow\\_e.html](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hpfb-dgpsa/onpp-bppn/food_guide_rainbow_e.html)

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## **Frequently Asked Questions**

### **1. What is Folic Acid?**

Folic Acid, or folate, is one of the B vitamins important for healthy growth of your unborn baby. It is essential to the normal development of your baby's spine, brain and skull, especially during the first four weeks of your pregnancy. It is, therefore, important to start taking vitamin supplements with Folic Acid before you get pregnant to reduce the risk of neural tube defect.

### **2. What are neural tube defects (NTDs)?**

Neural tube defects (NTDs) are birth defects that occur when the neural tube fails to close properly during the early weeks of pregnancy, resulting in abnormalities of the spine, brain or skull that can result in stillbirth or lifelong disability. Closure of the neural tube happens early in pregnancy, often before a woman knows she is pregnant. Spina bifida is the most common NTD.

### **3. How much Folic Acid should women take?**

All women who could become pregnant should take a multivitamin containing 0.4 mg of Folic Acid every day. To help reduce the risk of NTDs, you should start taking the vitamin supplement at least three months before you get pregnant and continue through the first three months of your pregnancy. Talk to your health professional to find the supplement best for you. If you have had a previous pregnancy affected by an NTD or have a family history of this problem, see your doctor. You may be advised to take a higher dosage of Folic Acid. If you have diabetes, obesity or epilepsy, you may be at higher risk of having a baby with an NTD, and you should see your doctor before planning pregnancy.

### **4. Which foods are rich in Folic Acid?**

Taking a vitamin supplement does not reduce or replace the need for a healthy, well-balanced diet according to Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating. Good or excellent sources of Folic Acid include dark green vegetables (broccoli, spinach, peas and brussel sprouts), corn, dried peas, beans, lentils, oranges and orange juice. Whole grain breads and foods fortified with Folic Acid also provide significant amounts of the vitamin.

### **5. Is it possible to get too much Folic Acid?**

Do not take more than one daily dose of vitamin supplement as indicated on the product label. Increasing your dose of Folic Acid beyond 1 mg per day without the advice of a doctor is not recommended. In large doses some substances in multivitamins could actually do more harm than good. This is especially true of Vitamin A in the retinol form. Try to select a supplement with Vitamin A as beta-carotene rather than as retinol. This difference is indicated on the label.

### **6. Can NTDs be detected before birth?**

Some NTDs can be detected before birth by prenatal screening tests. If you are pregnant and wish to know more about the prenatal diagnosis of NTDs, talk to your health professional about the prenatal blood test or ultrasound test that can give you more information about whether your unborn baby has an NTD.