



FOLIC ACID – WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

What Is Folic Acid?

Folic acid is a B vitamin. The body uses folic acid to help make red blood cells and other new cells. The folic acid found naturally in food is sometimes called “folate.”

Why Is Folic Acid Important?

People who do not get enough folic acid in their diet can get anemia—their blood does not carry oxygen well, and they feel tired and weak. Not having enough folic acid can also increase the risk of heart disease, colon cancer, and stroke.

Getting enough folic acid is *very* important in pregnancy. Taking folic acid from the very beginning of pregnancy can help decrease the chance of neural tube defects in your baby. Neural tube defects are problems of the spine and brain, like spina bifida. Severe neural tube defects can cause death.

Folic Acid in Food

The word folate comes from the same root as the word *foliage*, so leafy green vegetables are very good sources of folic acid. Folic acid is also found in cooked dry beans, nuts, and seeds. Enriched grains, such as bread, pasta, and rice, and fortified breakfast cereals, are also good sources of folic acid.

Check food labels to be sure that these foods have been enriched with folic acid. Look for the “Folic Acid for a Healthy Pregnancy” seal from the March of Dimes that can be found on some grain products that are fortified with folic acid.

How Much Folic Acid Do I Need?

Most people need to have about 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid in their diet every day. Pregnant women need 600 mcg a day. See the chart on the next page for ways to get enough folic acid in your diet.

If you are pregnant, or could become pregnant, you need more folic acid than we normally get from a regular diet. You will probably need to take a vitamin pill that adds folic acid to your diet.

You should take 400 mcg of *extra* folic acid every day in addition to your regular diet if you:

- are pregnant
- could become pregnant—this is because neural tube defects occur in the very first month of pregnancy, when most women don't even know they are pregnant

It is not a good idea to take more than 1000 mcg of extra folic acid. Too much folic acid can be dangerous for your health.

Who Else Should Take Extra Folic Acid?

You should take a folic acid pill or a multivitamin with folic acid in addition to your diet if you:

- have had a baby with a neural tube defect—you should take 4 milligrams (mg) of folic acid when trying to become pregnant and during the first trimester of pregnancy
- are breastfeeding—you should take a 400-mcg pill
- smoke—you should take a 400-mcg pill
- take a lot of aspirin or antacids—you should take a 400-mcg pill
- take some drugs for cancer treatment and for arthritis—ask your health care provider how much folic acid you need

Excellent Sources: Provide 100 micrograms (mcg) or more per ½ cup serving:

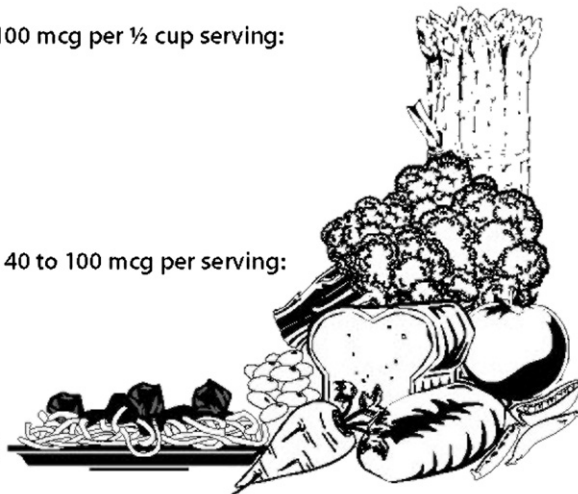
- Asparagus
- Turnip greens, mustard greens
- Okra
- Fortified breakfast cereals (see label for serving size)
- Cooked dry beans, such as pinto beans, kidney beans, lentils and black-eyed peas
- Liver (2 ounces, cooked)

Good Sources: Provide 40 to 100 mcg per ½ cup serving:

- Broccoli
- Spinach
- Green peas
- Fresh beets, cooked
- Spaghetti, pasta
- Rice
- Tofu

Other Good Sources: Provide 40 to 100 mcg per serving:

- Tomato juice (¾ cup)
- Orange (1)
- Avocado (¼)
- Sunflower seeds (1 ounce)
- Peanut butter (2 Tbsp)
- Enriched bread (1 slice)
- Flour tortilla (One 10" round)



FOR MORE INFORMATION

Folic Acid at the Pregnancy and Newborn Health Education Center March of Dimes web site:

http://www.marchofdimes.com/hbhb_syndication/173_769.asp

Folic Acid: What Should You Know? by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/folicacid/index.html>

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