



<http://www.womenshealth.gov>

1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

# Folic Acid

**Q: What is folic acid?**

**A:** Folic (FOH-lik) acid is a B vitamin. It helps the body make healthy new cells. “Folic acid” and “folate” mean the same thing. Folic acid is a manmade form of folate. Folate is found naturally in some foods. Most women do not get all the folic acid they need through food alone.

**Q: Who needs folic acid?**

**A:** All people need folic acid. But folic acid is very important for women who are able to get pregnant. When a woman has enough folic acid in her body before and during pregnancy, it can prevent major birth defects, including:

- **Spina bifida** (SPEYE-nuh BIF-ih-duh), which occurs when an unborn baby’s spinal column does not close to protect the spinal cord. As a result, the nerves that control leg movements and other functions do not work. Children with spina bifida often have lifelong disabilities. They may also need many surgeries.
- **Anencephaly** (an-en-SEF-uh-lee), which is when most or all of the brain does not develop. Babies with this problem die before or shortly after birth.

The results of some studies suggest that folic acid might also help to prevent other types of birth defects.

Folic acid also helps keep your blood healthy. Not getting enough can cause anemia (uh-NEE-mee-uh).

Experts think that folic acid might also play a role in:

- Heart health
- Preventing cell changes that may lead to cancer

More research is needed to know this for certain.

**Q: How much folic acid do women need?**

**A:** Women able to get pregnant need 400 to 800 mcg or micrograms of folic acid every day, even if they are not planning to get pregnant. (This is the same as 0.4 to 0.8 mg or milligrams.) That way, if they do become pregnant, their babies will be less likely to have birth defects. Talk with your doctor about how much folic acid you need if:

- You are pregnant or are planning to become pregnant. Pregnant women need 400 to 800 mcg of folic acid in the very early stages of pregnancy often before they know that they are pregnant. A pregnant woman should keep taking folic acid throughout pregnancy. Women should discuss their folic acid needs with their doctors. Some doctors prescribe prenatal vitamins that contain higher amounts of folic acid.
- You are breastfeeding. Breastfeeding women need 500 mcg. Some doctors suggest that breastfeeding women keep taking their prenatal vitamins to be sure they are getting plenty of folic acid while they are breastfeeding and should they become pregnant again.
- You had a baby with a birth defect of the brain or spine and want to get pregnant again. Your doctor may



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give you a prescription for 4,000 mcg of folic acid. That is 10 times the normal dose. Taking this high dose of folic acid can lower the risk of having another baby with these birth defects.

- You have a family member with spina bifida. Your doctor may give you a prescription for 4,000 mcg folic acid.
- You have spina bifida and want to get pregnant.

Some people also need more folic acid. Talk to your doctor about how much folic acid you need if you:

- Are taking medicines used to treat:
  - Epilepsy
  - Type 2 diabetes
  - Rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, psoriasis, asthma, and inflammatory bowel disease
- Have kidney disease and are on dialysis.
- Have liver disease.
- Have sickle cell disease.
- Have celiac disease.
- Often consume more than one alcoholic drink a day.

**Q: I don't plan on getting pregnant right now, and I am using birth control. Do I still need folic acid?**

**A:** Yes! Birth defects of the brain and spine happen in the very early stages of pregnancy, often before a woman knows she is pregnant. By the time she finds out she is pregnant, it might be too late to prevent those birth defects.

Also, half of all pregnancies in the United States are not planned. For these reasons, all women who are able to get pregnant need 400 to 800 mcg of folic acid every day.

**Q: How can I be sure I get enough folic acid each day?**

**A:** Women can get enough folic acid by taking a vitamin pill every day. If you have a hard time swallowing pills, you might try a chewable or liquid product that has folic acid. Most U.S. multi-vitamins have at least 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid. Check the label on the bottle to be sure. Or you can take a pill that only contains folic acid. When choosing a brand of vitamins, look for "USP" or "NSF" on the label. These "seals of approval" mean that the pills have been made properly and contain the amounts of vitamins stated on the label. Also, make sure the pills have not expired. If the bottle does not have an expiration date, do not buy it. Ask your pharmacist for help selecting a product. Please note, if you already are taking a daily prenatal vitamin, you probably are getting all the folic acid you need. Check the label to be sure.





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## Vitamin Label

Check the Supplement Facts label to be sure you are getting 400 to 800 mcg folic acid.

Supplement Facts		
Serving Size: 1 tablet		
Amount Per Serving	% Daily Value	
Vitamin A	5000IU	100
Vitamin C	60mg	100
Vitamin D	400 IU	100
Vitamin E	30 IU	100
Thiamin	1.5mg	100
Riboflavin	1.7mg	100
Niacin	20mg	100
Vitamin B6	2mg	100
<b>Folic Acid</b>	<b>400mcg</b>	<b>100</b>
Vitamin B12	6mcg	100
Biotin	30mcg	10
Pantothenic Acid	10mg	100
Calcium	162mg	16
Iron	18mg	100
Iodine	150mcg	100
Magnesium	100mg	25
Zinc	15mg	100
Selenium	20mcg	100
Copper	2mg	100
Manganese	3.5mg	175
Chromium	65mcg	54
Molybdenum	150mcg	200
Chloride	72mg	2
Potassium	80mg	2

Find **folic acid**. Choose a vitamin that says “400 mcg” or “100%” next to folic acid.

## Q: What foods contain folic acid?

**A:** Folic acid is found naturally in some foods, including leafy vegetables, citrus fruits, beans (legumes), and whole grains. Folic acid is added to foods that are labeled “enriched,” such as:

- Breakfast cereals (Some have 100 percent of the Daily Value of folic acid in each serving)
- Breads

- Flours
- Pastas
- Cornmeal
- White rice

## Food Label

Check the label on the package to see if the food has folic acid. The label will tell you how much folic acid is in each serving. Sometimes, the label will say “folate” instead of folic acid.

Nutrition Facts			
Serving Size 1 cup (228g)			
Servings Per Container 2			
Amount Per Serving			
Calories 250		Calories from Fat 110	
		% Daily Value*	
<b>Total Fat</b>	12g		<b>18%</b>
Saturated Fat 3g			<b>15%</b>
<b>Cholesterol</b>	30mg		<b>10%</b>
<b>Sodium</b>	470mg		<b>20%</b>
<b>Total Carbohydrate</b>	31g		<b>10%</b>
Dietary Fiber 0g			<b>0%</b>
Sugar 5g			
<b>Protein</b>	5g		
*Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your Daily Values may be higher or lower depending on your calorie needs:			
	Calories:	2,000	2,500
Total Fat	Less than	65g	80g
Sat Fat	Less than	20g	25g
Cholesterol	Less than	30mg	300mg
Sodium	Less than	2,400mg	2,400mg
Total Carbohydrates		300g	375g
Dietary Fiber		25g	30g

Find **folate**. Read across to see how much folic acid is in your food.



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**Q: Can I get enough folic acid through food alone?**

**A:** The body does not use the natural form of folic acid (folate) as easily as the man-made form. We cannot be sure that eating foods that contain folate would have the same benefits as consuming folic acid. Also, even if you eat a healthy, well-balanced diet, you might not get all the nutrients you need every day from food alone. In the United States, most women who eat foods enriched with folic acid are still not getting all that they need. That's why it's important to take a vitamin with folic acid every day.

**Q: How can I remember to take folic acid every day?**

**A:** Take your folic acid at the same time every day, such as when you brush your teeth, eat breakfast, or give your children their daily vitamins. This way, taking folic acid becomes a routine. If you can, set up your cell phone or computer to give you a daily reminder.

**Q: Can women get too much folic acid?**

**A:** You can't get too much folic acid from foods that naturally contain it. But unless your doctor tells you otherwise, do not consume more than 1,000 mcg of folic acid a day. Consuming too much folic acid can hide signs that a person is lacking vitamin B12, which can cause nerve damage. Lacking vitamin B12 is rare among women of childbearing age. Plus, most prenatal vitamins also contain B12 to help women get all that they need. People at risk of not having enough vitamin B12 are mainly people 50 years and older and people who eat no animal products.

**Q: I am no longer of childbearing age. How much folic acid do I need?**

**A:** Older adults need 400 mcg of folic acid every day for good health. But older adults need to be sure they also are getting enough vitamin B12. Too much folic acid can hide signs that a person is lacking vitamin B12. People older than 50 are at increased risk of not having enough vitamin B12. If you are 50 or older, ask your doctor what vitamins and supplements you might need. ■



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### *For More Information...*

For more information on folic acid, please call [womenshealth.gov](http://womenshealth.gov) at 800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

#### **Office of Dietary Supplements, NIH, HHS**

Phone number: (301) 435-2920  
Internet Address: <http://ods.od.nih.gov/factsheets/folate.asp>

#### **National Center for Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities, CDC, HHS**

Phone number: (800) 232-4636  
Internet Address: <http://www.cdc.gov/folicacid>

#### **National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, NIH, HHS**

Phone number: (800) 352-9424  
Internet Address: <http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/anencephaly/anencephaly.htm>

#### **March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation**

Phone number: (888) 663-4637  
Internet Address: <http://www.modimes.org>

#### **Spina Bifida Association of America**

Phone number: (800) 621-3141  
Internet Address: <http://www.sbaa.org/site/PageServer?pagename=index>

#### **American Pregnancy Association**

Phone number: (972) 815-2337  
Internet Address: <http://www.americanpregnancy.org/pregnancyhealth/folicacid.html>

#### **Reviewed by:**

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