

Go Folic! Women's Nutrition Project

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About Folic Acid

- Folic acid is an important B-Vitamin that is necessary for cell maintenance and repair, synthesis of DNA, amino acid metabolism and formation of red and white blood cells.
- Folic acid is necessary for proper cell growth and development of embryos.

Folic Acid and Pregnancy

- Neural Tube Defects (NTDs) are serious birth defects of the brain and spine that occur between the 17th and 30th day after conception.
- The two most common neural tube defects are anencephaly and spina bifida.
- The estimated annual health care cost for a child born with a neural tube defect is approximately \$294,000.
- When taken one month before conception and throughout the first trimester, it has been proven to reduce the risk for giving birth to a baby with a neural tube defect by 50 – 70%.
- In San Francisco, one in every 10 babies is born prematurely (before the 37th week). A 2008 National Institutes of Health study found that taking daily folic acid supplements for one year prior to conception may significantly lower a woman's risk for pre-term labor.
- Babies born before the 37 week are at much greater risk of medical problems, disability, and death before their first birthday. According to the March of Dimes, the average medical cost for babies born prematurely from birth through their first year is nearly \$50,000 versus \$4,551 for babies who are born later.
- While more research is needed, there is evidence that folic acid use may also reduce the risk for other birth defects, such as cleft lip and palate and defects of the cardiovascular system and urinary tract.

The Recommendation

- Because 50% of all pregnancies in the US are unplanned, and neural tube defects occur before most women know that they are pregnant, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommends that all women capable of pregnancy take a daily supplement containing 400 to 800 mcg of folic acid.
- Women with diabetes, epilepsy and obesity are at increased risk of having a baby with an NTD. Women with these conditions should consult their provider before pregnancy to see if they should take a larger dose of folic acid.

Other Health Benefits of Folic Acid

- Folic acid supplementation may have broad-ranging benefits for a woman's overall health and wellbeing, information that is not widely known.
- Folic acid plays an important role in the production of red blood cells. Individuals who are deficient in folic acid sometimes develop a form of anemia called megaloblastic anemia (characterized by a reduced number of red blood cells).
- High levels of the amino acid homocysteine are independently associated with an increased risk of heart disease and stroke. It has been shown that taking folic acid lowers homocysteine levels in both men and women, but it is not yet known whether folic acid supplementation also lowers the risk of heart disease and stroke.

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- While more research is needed, recent studies have found that folic acid supplementation may provide some protection from breast, colon, cervical, and other cancers.

Folic Acid = Beauty from the Inside Out

- Hair follicles, nail beds, and skin cells, blood cells are among the most rapidly dividing cells in the body. Because folate is important in tissue growth and cellular function, it is essential for your body to have enough of it to produce healthy skin, nails and hair.

About Folic Acid Supplements

- Supplementation is recommended because the body only absorbs 50% of the folate it gets from food. By contrast, it absorbs 85% of the folic acid in “enriched” or “fortified” grain products, and 100% of the folic acid in supplements.
- Folic acid is more effective when taken with the B group vitamins, especially Vitamin B12 and Vitamin B6. Go Folic! Multis contain all of these nutrients.
- Despite the potential benefits, a 2007 March of Dimes Gallup survey showed that only 40% of women in the United States between the ages of 18 and 45 take a multivitamin containing folic acid on a daily basis.
- In the same poll, 89% of women who did not take vitamins said that they would do so if counseled by their health provider about the benefits.

Folic Acid and Diet

- Most multivitamins and about 50 breakfast cereals contain the 400 mcg of folic acid recommended daily.
- Even though health experts recommend that women take a multivitamin with folic acid, a healthy diet that includes enriched grain products and folate-rich foods is also important.
- Foods that are naturally high in folate, the form of folic acid found in foods, include dark leafy greens, beans & lentils, peanuts and sunflower seeds, orange juice, berries, and avocados.

For Additional Information

- *U.S. Preventive Services Task Force*
<http://www.ahrq.gov/clinic/uspstf/uspsnrfol.htm>
- *Florida Folic Acid Coalition*
<http://www.folicacidnow.net/healthProfessionals-SBFA.html>
- *March of Dimes*
http://www.marchofdimes.com/professionals/14332_1151.asp#head7
- American College of Physicians
http://www.acponline.org/cgi/search?q=folic+acid&site=ACP_Online&x=0&y=0
- National Council on Folic Acid
<http://www.folicacidinfo.org/index.php>