



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 very tired and weak. Children who do not get enough folic acid may grow poorly. Not having enough folic acid can also increase the risk of heart disease, colon cancer, and stroke.

Getting enough folic acid is *really* important in pregnancy. Taking folic acid from the very beginning of pregnancy can help prevent some neural tube defects in your baby. Neural tube defects are problems of the spine and brain, such as spina bifida. Severe neural tube defects can cause death or make it hard for your baby to walk.

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 next page for ways to get enough folic acid in your diet.

You should take 400 mcg of **extra** folic acid every day 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.

If you are pregnant, or could become pregnant, you need more folic acid than you can normally get from your diet. You will probably need to take a vitamin pill that adds folic acid to your diet. Talk with your health care provider about how much folic acid you should be taking.

It is not a good idea to take more than 1,000 mcg of extra folic acid. Too much folic acid can be dangerous for your health.

Who Else Should Take Extra Folic Acid?

Other people who may need to take some extra folic acid are:

- Smokers
- People who take a lot of aspirin or antacids
- People who take some drugs for cancer treatment and for arthritis

Talk with your health care provider about folic acid. She can help you decide if you need some extra folic acid in your diet and how much you should take.

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Folic Acid in Your 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.

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

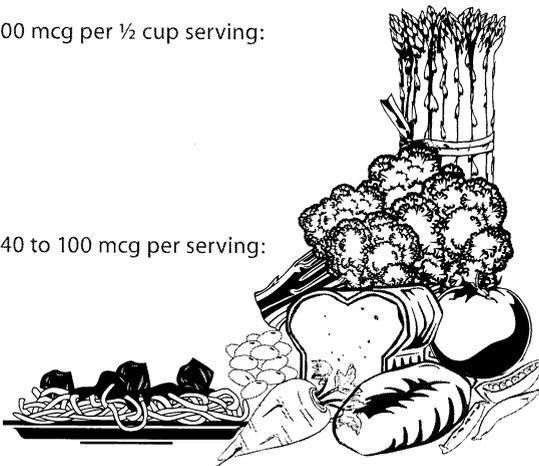
- Asparagus
- Turnip greens, mustard greens
- Okra
- Fortified breakfast cereals (see label for serving size)
- Cooked dry beans, such as pinto beans, kidney beans, lentils and black-eyed peas
- Liver (2 ounces, cooked)

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

March of Dimes Folic Acid Net Web site: www.folicacid.net/login.asp

This Web site has a great, easy-to-use quiz for helping you learn about folic acid and getting enough in your diet.

American Dietetic Association Web site: www.eatright.org

This Web site has more in-depth information on folic acid as well as many other nutrition questions.

Spina Bifida Association Web site: www.sbaa.org

This Web site has very good information on folic acid and more in-depth information on neural tube defects.

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