

Folate for women

Folate (also known as folic acid) is a B-group vitamin. Women of child-bearing age should take extra folate daily because this vitamin is crucial to the healthy development of babies in early pregnancy.

Folate taken before conception and during the first few weeks of pregnancy can prevent seven out of ten cases of neural tube defects, such as spina bifida. Over 600 pregnancies in Australia every year are affected by neural tube defects.

The neural tube

In the developing foetus, the neural tube will later become the baby's spinal cord, brain and the bones that enclose them. If something goes wrong in their development, the result is called a neural tube defect. This can cause a wide range of disabilities like loss of bladder and bowel control and paralysis of the legs. In some cases, the effects can be more severe.

The average diet doesn't contain enough folate

Most women don't get enough folate. It's difficult to measure just how much folate you get from your diet because the vitamin is affected by how foods are cooked and stored.

A baby's neural tube is formed and closed in the first four to six weeks of pregnancy. By the time most women know or suspect they are pregnant, the time to benefit from extra folate has passed.

Women who are able to get pregnant need 0.4–0.5mg of folate daily. The best way to make sure you get this amount is to take a supplement as well as eating foods naturally rich in folate. You can also eat foods that have folate added to them like some cereals.

Even women who aren't planning to have a baby should increase their folate intake because around half of all pregnancies are unplanned.

How to increase your folate intake

Ways to get enough folate include:

- Take folate supplements.
- Eat folate-rich foods such as asparagus, spinach, Brussels sprouts, oranges, bananas, strawberries and legumes.
- Choose foods that have been fortified with folate, such as breakfast cereals and bread.

At higher risk

Some women have a higher risk of having a baby with a neural tube defect. These women need to take a higher dose (5mg) of folate each day. This is 10 times higher than that recommended for women with a low risk. **These high doses should be taken under medical supervision.**

You are at greater risk if you (or your partner):

- Already have a baby with a neural tube defect
- Have a neural tube defect yourself
- Have a close relative affected by a neural tube defect
- Take medicine for epilepsy or seizures – some medications affect the absorption of folate.

You are also at higher risk if you have type I diabetes, and should discuss folate supplements with your doctor.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Family planning clinic
- An accredited practising dietitian, contact the Dietitians Association of Australia
- Your local pharmacist
- Community health centre

Things to remember

- Folate reduces the risk of neural tube defects in babies.
- Even women who aren't planning to have a baby should increase their folate intake because about half of all pregnancies are unplanned.
- Using folate supplements is a good way to ensure adequate daily intake.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Department of Health - Public Health Nutrition Program

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