

## Folate for women

Folate (also known as folic acid) is a B-group vitamin essential for the healthy development of the fetus in early pregnancy. Women of child-bearing age should take extra folate daily to prevent neural tube defects, such as spina bifida. Even women who aren't planning to have a baby should increase their folate intake because about half of all pregnancies in Australia are unplanned.

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

### The neural tube

In the developing fetus, 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.

If you are planning a pregnancy or are in the early stages of pregnancy, you should increase your folate intake by an additional 0.4mg (400mcg) per day above the recommended daily intake (RDI) of 0.6mg (600mcg) per day for pregnancy.

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

### Folic acid fortification of food in Australia

Since October 2009, all wheat flour used for bread making in Australia must now contain folic acid. This means that most bread sold in Australia (except organic bread) is fortified with folic acid. This is in line with the Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) mandatory folic acid fortification regulation, introduced to help reduce the incidence of neural tube defects across most of the population.

Breakfast cereals and fruit juices for sale in Australia may also have folic acid added.

### How to increase your folate intake

Ways to get enough folate include:

- Take folate supplements.
- Eat folate-rich foods – folate is present in a variety of vegetables and fruits as well as legumes, nuts and yeast extracts such as Vegemite.
- Choose foods that have been fortified with folate – this includes some breakfast cereals and fruit juices, and most 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 1 diabetes – discuss folate supplements with your doctor.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Family planning clinic
- Family Planning Victoria Tel. 1800 013 952 or (03) 9257 0100 – for information about folate and neural tube defects
- 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:**

Royal Women's Hospital

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