

## Folic acid/folate and pregnancy

(June 2016)

Folate is a B group vitamin needed for healthy growth and development. This vitamin is known as **folate** when it is found naturally in food, such as green leafy vegetables, and as **folic acid** when it is added to food, such as bread and breakfast cereals, or used in dietary supplements.

If you are thinking about having a baby you need to know about folate. Folate is essential to the healthy development of babies in early pregnancy. A baby's growth is the most rapid in the first weeks of life – often before you are aware you are pregnant. The neural tube closes and fuses very early in pregnancy; if it doesn't close, the result is a neural tube defect (NTD) such as spina bifida. There is more information about neural tube defects on the Australian Spina Bifida & Hydrocephalus Association (ASBHA) website.

In September 2009, it became a legal requirement in Australia that all bread-making flour, except organic flour, contain added folic acid. As a result, your bread now contains added folic acid. Three slices of bread (100g) contains an average of 120 micrograms of folic acid. This is a Government initiative that acts as a safety net for women to help protect their babies against neural tube defects. The New Zealand Government has introduced voluntary fortification of bread with folic acid.

However, if you are planning a pregnancy, the best way to guarantee you get enough folic acid, is to take a daily folic acid supplement at least one month before and three months after conception. You don't need to take folic acid supplements after that. This is in addition to eating foods with added folic acid and naturally rich in folate.

Folic acid supplements are available over the counter from pharmacies and through your doctor at varying doses. Look for supplements that contain at least 400 micrograms of folic acid; these will generally be supplements containing only folic acid or special pregnancy supplements. Multi-vitamin supplements generally contain less. Trying to get your folic acid needs from general multi-vitamins may result in you getting higher than recommended amounts of other vitamins and minerals. Your doctor, midwife, pharmacist or a dietitian can help you to choose the best supplement for your needs.

Consuming enough folic acid substantially reduces the risk of neural tube defects but won't prevent all cases. If you have a family history of neural tube defects you may require more folic acid and you should ask your doctor or health care provider for advice about your individual needs.

Remember, it's important to enjoy a wide variety of nutritious foods every day in order to get the variety of vitamins and minerals needed for a healthy pregnancy.

Further information on folic acid fortification.

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