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FOLIC ACID

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FOLIC ACID

WHAT IS FOLIC ACID?

Folic acid is a B vitamin. It helps the body make healthy new cells. "Folic acid" and "folate" mean the same thing. Folic acid is a manmade form of folate. Folate is found naturally in some foods. Most women do not get all the folic acid they need through food alone.

WHO NEEDS FOLIC ACID?

All people need folic acid. But folic acid is very important for women who are able to get pregnant. When a woman has enough folic acid in her body before and during pregnancy, it can prevent major birth defects, including:

- Spina bifida which occurs when an unborn baby's spinal column does not close to protect the spinal cord. As a result, the nerves that control leg movements and other functions may not work. Children with spina bifida can have lifelong disabilities and may need many surgeries.
- Anencephaly which is when some of the cranium does not develop. Babies with this problem die before or shortly after birth.

Some studies suggest that folic acid might also help to prevent other types of birth defects.

Folic acid also helps keep your blood healthy. Not getting enough can cause anemia.

HOW MUCH FOLIC ACID DO WOMEN NEED?

A woman should have 400 to 800 mcg or micrograms of folic acid every day, even if they are not planning to get pregnant. So, if a woman does become pregnant, their baby will be less likely to have birth defects. Over 50% of pregnancies are unplanned.

Talk with your doctor about how much folic acid you need if:

- You are pregnant or are planning to become pregnant. Pregnant women need 400 to 800 mcg of folic acid in the very early stages of pregnancy often before they know that they are pregnant. With some underlying medical conditions a higher dose is needed (5000 mcg).
- You are breastfeeding. Some doctors suggest that breastfeeding women keep taking their prenatal vitamins to be sure they are getting plenty of folic acid while they are breastfeeding and should they become pregnant again.
- You had a baby with a birth defect of the brain or spine and want to get pregnant again. Your doctor may give you a prescription for 5000 mcg of folic acid. Taking this high dose of folic acid can lower the risk of having another baby with these birth defects.



- You have a family member with spina bifida. Your doctor may give you a prescription for 5000 mcg folic acid.
- You have spina bifida and want to get pregnant.
- You are:
 - Taking medicines used to treat: Epilepsy, type 2 diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, psoriasis, asthma, and inflammatory bowel disease
 - Have kidney disease and are on dialysis.
 - Have liver disease
 - Have sickle cell disease.
 - Have celiac disease.
 - Often consume more than one alcoholic drink a day.

**I DON'T PLAN ON GETTING PREGNANT RIGHT NOW;
DO I STILL NEED FOLIC ACID?**

Yes! Birth defects of the brain and spine happen in the very early stages of pregnancy, often before a woman knows she is pregnant. By the time she finds out she is pregnant, it might be too late to prevent those birth defects. Also, half of all pregnancies are not planned. For these reasons, all women who are able to get pregnant need 400 to 800 mcg of folic acid daily.

CAN I GET ENOUGH FOLIC ACID THROUGH FOOD ALONE?

The body does not use the natural form of folic acid (folate) as easily as the man-made form. We cannot be sure that eating foods that contain folate would have the same benefits as consuming folic acid. Also, even if you eat a healthy, well-balanced diet, you might not get all the nutrients you need every day from food alone.

CAN WOMEN GET TOO MUCH FOLIC ACID?

You can't get too much folic acid from foods that naturally contain it. But unless your doctor tells you otherwise, do not consume more than 1,000 mcg of folic acid a day. Consuming too much folic acid can hide signs that a person is lacking vitamin B12, which can cause nerve damage. Lacking vitamin B12 is rare among women of childbearing age. Plus, most prenatal vitamins also contain B12 to help women get all that they need. People at risk of not having enough vitamin B12 are mainly people 50 years and older and people who eat no animal products.

References

<http://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/preventative-health-wellness/nutrition/folate-folic-acid>

<https://www.womenshealth.gov/publications/our-publications/fact-sheet/folic-acid.html>

