Folic acid: Questions and Answers

Q: Why can't I wait until I'm pregnant—or planning to get pregnant to start taking folic acid?

A: Birth defects of the brain and spine (anencephaly and spina bifida) happen in the first few weeks of pregnancy; often before you find out you're pregnant. By the time you realize you're pregnant, it might be too late to prevent those birth defects. Also, half of all pregnancies in the United States are unplanned.

These are two reasons why it is important for all women who can get pregnant to be sure to get 400 mcg of folic acid every day, even if they aren't planning a pregnancy any time soon.

Q: I'm planning to get pregnant this month. Is it too late to start taking folic acid?

A: The CDC recommends women to take 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid every day, starting at least one month before getting pregnant. If you are trying to get pregnant this month, or planning to get pregnant soon, start taking 400 mcg of folic acid today!

Q: I already have a child with spina bifida. Should I do anything different to prepare for my next pregnancy?

A: Women who had one pregnancy affected by a birth defect of the brain or spine might have another. Talk to your doctor about taking 4,000 micrograms (4.0 milligrams) of folic acid each day at least 1 month before getting pregnant and during the first few months of being pregnant. This is ten times the amount most people take. Your doctor will give you a prescription.

You should not take more than one multivitamin each day. Taking more than one each day over time could be harmful to you and your baby.

Q: Can't I get enough folic acid by eating a well-balanced healthy diet?

A: It is hard to eat a diet that has all the nutrients you need every day. Even with careful planning, you might not get all the vitamins you need from your diet alone. That's why it's important to take a vitamin with folic acid every day.

Q: I can't swallow large pills. How can I take a vitamin with folic acid?

A: These days, multivitamins with folic acid come in chewable chocolate or fruit flavors, liquids, and large oval or smaller round pills.

A single serving of many breakfast cereals also has the amount of folic acid that a woman needs each day. Check the label! Look for cereals that have 100% daily value (DV) of folic acid in a serving, which is 400 micrograms (mcg).

National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities
Division of Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities

CS212882-B

Q: Vitamins cost too much. How can I get the vitamin with folic acid that I need?

A: Many stores offer a single folic acid supplement for just pennies a day. Another good choice is a store brand multivitamin, which includes more of the vitamins a woman needs each day. Unless your doctor suggests a special type, you do not have to choose among vitamins for women or active people. A basic multivitamin meets the needs of most women.

Q: How can I remember to take a vitamin with folic acid every day?

A: Make it easy to remember by taking your vitamin at the same time every day. Try taking your vitamin when you:

- Brush your teeth, OR
- Eat breakfast, OR
- Finish your shower, OR
- Brush your hair, OR

Seeing the vitamin bottle on the bathroom or kitchen counter can help you remember it, too. Or if you use a cell phone or PDA, you can program it to give you a daily reminder. If you have children, you can take your vitamin when they take theirs.

Today's woman is busy! You know that you should exercise, eat right, and get enough sleep. You might wonder how you can fit another thing into your day. But it only takes a few seconds to take a vitamin to get all the folic acid you need.

Q: Are there other health benefits of taking folic acid?

A: Folic acid might help to prevent some other birth defects, such as cleft lip and palate and some heart defects. There might also be other health benefits of taking folic acid for both women and men. More research is needed to confirm these other health benefits. All adults should take 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid every day.

Q: Is it better to take more than 400 mcg of folic acid every day?

A: When taking supplements, more is not better. Women who can get pregnant (whether planning to or not) need just 400 mcg of folic acid daily, and they can get this amount from vitamins or fortified foods. This is in addition to eating foods rich in folate. But, your doctor might ask you to take more for certain reasons. For example, women who have had a previous pregnancy affected by birth defects of the brain and spine and women with sickle cell disease should be sure to talk with their doctors about the need for more folic acid.

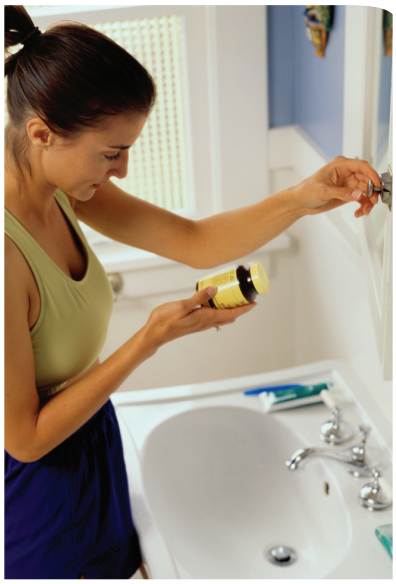
Q: What is folate and how is it different from folic acid?

A: Folate is a form of the B vitamin folic acid. Folate is found naturally in some foods, such as leafy, dark green vegetables, citrus fruits and juices, and beans.

The body does not use folate as easily as folic acid. We cannot be sure that eating folate would have the same benefits as getting 400 micrograms of man-made (synthetic) folic acid. Women who can get pregnant should consume 400 micrograms of synthetic folic acid in addition to the natural food folate from a varied diet.

Q: What is "synthetic" folic acid?

A: Synthetic folic acid is the simple, man-made form of the B vitamin folate. Folic acid is found in most multivitamins and has been added in U.S. foods labeled as "enriched" such as bread, pasta, rice, and breakfast cereals. The words, "folic acid" and "synthetic folic acid" mean the same thing.



To learn more about folic acid and how to prevent birth defects, please visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at www.cdc.gov/folicacid or call 1-800-232-4636 (CDC-INFO).