



Patient Information

Folic Acid: For Pregnancy and More

Folic acid is a B vitamin that is found naturally in foods as folate. Some foods that are rich in folate are leafy green vegetables, oranges, bananas, strawberries, beans, peas, asparagus and broccoli.

Some foods are also fortified with a synthetic form of folic acid. These include some cereals and grain products.

You can also take folic acid supplements in the form of pills, powders or liquid. These are all synthetic forms of the vitamin. These synthetic forms of folic acid are actually absorbed by the body more easily than natural forms.

Folic acid is involved in all functions of the body that require cell division. It is an important vitamin for any woman of childbearing age, but it also has many other protective properties, which will be described in this handout.

Pregnancy

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that up to 70% of all neural tube defects could be prevented if every woman of childbearing age took folic acid daily — before pregnancy, during pregnancy and after delivery. Neural tube defects are birth defects of the brain and spine.

Although researchers don't understand exactly how folic acid works, they do know that it prevents the two most common neural tube defects:

- spina bifida, the leading cause of childhood paralysis, which occurs when the spine and back bones do not close completely.
- anencephaly, which occurs when the brain and skull bones are severely underdeveloped and do not form correctly.

Taking folic acid can also prevent other birth defects in your baby, such as a heart defect, cleft lip or cleft palate.

Pregnant women need folic acid because it is essential for the proper growth and development of the baby in the womb. Folic acid ensures normal cell replication and contributes to the formation of DNA and RNA.

In addition, when taken as part of a B-complex vitamin, folic acid can strengthen the reproductive systems of women who are having trouble getting pregnant.

Experts recommend that all women of childbearing age get at least 400 micrograms of folic acid per day. Pregnant women can take 600 micrograms. The daily intake of folic acid in adults should not be more than 1,000 micrograms per day. Too much folic acid should not hurt most people, but this much folic acid also offers no extra value.

Heart Benefits

Your body contains an amino acid called homocysteine. High levels of homocysteine in the body can eventually contribute to heart disease and stroke. For example, one study showed that men with high homocysteine levels were three times more likely to suffer a heart attack than men with lower levels of homocysteine.

The good news is that research has shown that folic acid is a strong factor in lowering levels of homocysteine in the body. Reducing homocysteine in the body reduces the risk of heart disease and stroke.

Mental Health

Researchers have found that some adults who are depressed have a low level of folate in the body. Studies have shown that supplementing a diet with folate can improve the condition of depressed patients.

Taking folic acid in the form of a supplement also may improve the effectiveness of antidepressants, according to studies of people with depression who have low levels of folic acid in their blood.

Alzheimer's Disease

Some research has shown that low levels of folic acid are associated with an increased risk of Alzheimer's disease. More research is needed, but people with Alzheimer's disease may want to consider taking folic acid.

Cancer

Some studies have suggested that taking folic acid may decrease the risk of certain types of cancers, including breast cancer, pancreatic cancer and colon cancer. But research is just beginning, and more study is needed.

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Additional Notes:
