

Folic Acid

What every woman needs to know
before becoming pregnant

Recap of folic acid top tips

- Take a daily 400mcg supplement of folic acid (or 5mg if at higher risk), at least 3 months before conception and for the first 3 months of pregnancy.
- Eat a healthy diet, including lots of fruits and vegetables (especially those containing natural folates), as well as foods that have been fortified with folic acid
- Ensure that you're a healthy weight before trying to conceive
- Stop smoking and drinking alcohol.
- If you have a long term health condition, seek medical advice before trying to conceive



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All women of childbearing age who could become pregnant should take a daily 400mcg supplement of folic acid

Why is folic acid so important?

The words folic acid may not mean much to you, but this important B vitamin (vitamin B9) plays a very significant role in the growth and development of the cells in our body and in the formation of DNA.

Folic acid is essential to create the very building blocks for life, which is why it becomes particularly important in the very early days of pregnancy when cell division is at its most rapid.

Because of this, women's bodies need extra folic acid both **before conception** and during early pregnancy to support the development of their babies.

An increased risk of neural tube defects

A lack of folic acid at this critical stage increases the risk of babies developing serious birth defects of the brain and spine called neural tube defects (NTDs), such as spina bifida and anencephaly.

NTDs occur when the brain and spine fail to form properly during the first 28 days of pregnancy, before many women even realise that they are pregnant.

This is why it's so important that women increase their intake of folic acid **BEFORE** they try to conceive. Folic acid is water soluble, which means that our bodies can't store it very well. So, you also need to ensure that you're getting a fresh supply of folic acid every day.

The need for a daily supplement

To meet this extra demand for folic acid, most women need to take a daily supplement containing 400mcg of folic acid, ideally for 3 months prior to conception and continuing for the first 3 months of pregnancy.

However, some women are known to have an increased risk of their pregnancy being affected, and should speak to their doctor about taking the recommended higher, 5mg daily dose of the vitamin.

Women that have a higher risk of experiencing a NTD include:

- Couples where either partner has spina bifida or a family history of NTDs, or that have had a previously affected pregnancy;
- women who have diabetes;
- women who have conditions that affect absorption, i.e. coeliac disease;
- women taking certain anti-seizure medication for epilepsy;
- and women that are very overweight (BMI 25+) or obese (BMI 30+).

If taken as recommended, both before and during early pregnancy, folic acid can help to reduce the risk of these serious birth defects by up to 72%

The higher 5mg dose of folic acid may only be available from your doctor on prescription.

Women of certain ethnic backgrounds are also shown to have an increased risk of NTD, including women of Celtic, Northern Chinese, Cree, Hispanic, and Sikh heritage. The exact reason for this increased risk is unknown, but is thought to be a combination of genetic and cultural dietary factors.

Do I need folic acid if I'm not planning a pregnancy?

It's very important to start taking folic acid **BEFORE** you try to conceive. If you're not planning a pregnancy or thinking about getting pregnant just yet this might not seem very relevant to you. **But... if you are having sex there's always a chance that you could get pregnant.**

Did you know that over half of all pregnancies are unplanned? If you're sexually active, it's never too soon to learn about folic acid!

Where can I find folate and folic acid?

Folate, the natural form of folic acid, can be found in a wide variety of foods, such as green leafy vegetables (e.g. spinach, cabbage), broccoli, oranges and yeast extract.

It's really important to eat a healthy and well balanced diet, with lots of natural source folates, especially if you are pregnant or planning a pregnancy. Over-cooking and poor storage of these foods can reduce their nutritional content. Careful storage and steaming or eating these foods raw will help to preserve as much of their vitamin content as possible.

Although a healthy diet would normally provide you with enough folate, it's not possible to get the additional folic acid that's recommended to support and protect a pregnancy through these natural sources alone. This is the reason that daily dietary supplements are recommended, and why over 80 countries around the world have now chosen to fortify staple foods such as bread, flour, rice and corn masa, to help increase women's intake of this important vitamin before they conceive. The main, and most stable source of folate is the folic acid that is found in supplements and fortified foods.

You can buy folic acid (or prenatal supplements containing 400mcg folic acid) from your pharmacy or some supermarkets, or on prescription from your GP.

Helping your folic acid to work

Whilst folic acid is stable, there are some things that can affect our bodies from absorbing it properly.

Your lifestyle:

Both smoking and alcohol consumption can prevent folic acid from being absorbed properly. So

that's another good reason to stop smoking and drinking alcohol before you try to conceive!

Being very overweight can also affect how your body responds to folic acid, so if you're very overweight it's a good idea to try and reach a healthier weight before you try to conceive. Being very overweight can also affect fertility, so by losing weight you could also help improve your chances of conceiving.

Medications:

Certain medications (such as Trimethoprim and Methotrexate) can also affect folate absorption. If you want to have a baby and you're currently receiving medical treatment or taking long term medication for a chronic condition, it's very important to check with your doctor to make sure that your medication is safe to use during pregnancy, or if any changes will need to be made to your treatment before you try to conceive. **NEVER** stop taking any medication that you have been prescribed without consulting your doctor.

What if I'm already pregnant?

If you're already pregnant but haven't been taking folic acid, please try not to worry. Remember that most babies are born healthy. If you're under 12 weeks gestation, you can start taking folic acid now, until the end of your 12th week of pregnancy.

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