



Folic Acid Facts: What You Need to Know Now for a Happily Ever After

One of the most exciting scientific developments in the past several decades is the finding that folic acid (a water-soluble B vitamin) plays a critical role in protecting against neural tube birth defects (NTDs), such as spina bifida, when taken by women of childbearing age before and during pregnancy. Here are the facts that you need to know.

Fact: In the U.S., approximately 4,000 pregnancies are affected by neural tube birth defects (NTDs) each year and worldwide these birth defects affect 300,000 or more pregnancies annually.

Neural tube birth defects (NTDs) include conditions such as spina bifida (a failure of closure of the neural tube that surrounds the spinal cord) and anencephaly (partial absence of the brain). Babies with spina bifida generally survive, but may require extensive surgical and medical care and may be permanently disabled. Babies with anencephaly do not survive.

Fact: Folic acid should be taken before and during early pregnancy to help prevent neural tube birth defects (NTDs).

It's a common misconception that women only need folic acid once they're already pregnant (often taken through their prenatal vitamins). Adequate folic acid intake for several months **before** a woman gets pregnant and for the first few months of pregnancy is the key to protecting against neural tube defects. Since half of the pregnancies in the U.S. are unplanned, and since the neural tube is formed in the first few weeks of pregnancy, the defect can occur before a woman even realizes she is pregnant. Any woman who **could** get pregnant should take a multivitamin with 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid each day, even if she's not planning for a baby right now.

Fact: Taking a multivitamin with 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid is the simplest and most effective way to ensure an adequate intake.

Folate, the form of this B vitamin that occurs naturally in foods, is not very well absorbed. Folic acid, the synthetic form of the vitamin that is used in dietary supplements and fortified foods, is very efficiently absorbed by the body. The Food and Nutrition Board of the Institute of Medicine, which makes health recommendations for consumers, issued new recommendations for folic acid in 1998 and urged women capable of becoming pregnant to consume 400 mcg of folic acid daily from supplements, fortified foods, or both—in addition to consuming food folate from a varied diet. They added that, when it comes to protecting against neural tube birth defects, the evidence for a protective effect from supplements containing folic acid is much stronger than the evidence for food folate.