

folic acid

an essential ingredient for making healthy babies

This leaflet is for any woman who is or might get pregnant, or is thinking about getting pregnant in the near future. It explains how you can help protect your unborn baby from serious conditions like spina bifida by making sure you're getting enough of the vitamin folic acid.

why your baby needs folic acid

'Getting enough folic acid before you get pregnant and during the early days of your pregnancy is the best way to help protect your baby from neural tube defects (NTDs) like spina bifida.'

Research has shown that women who take folic acid before and in the early stages of pregnancy are much less likely to have a baby with an NTD like spina bifida, or to have a miscarriage or stillbirth as a result of an NTD.

NTDs occur when a baby's spine fails to form correctly in the womb. Spina bifida, the most widely known NTD, happens when one or more of the bones in the spine are not fully developed. This leaves a gap in the spine, resulting in damage to the nerves and spinal cord. The effects vary, but many people with spina bifida will have some paralysis and so will need aids to enable them to walk or will need to use a wheelchair. Spina bifida can also affect the nerves controlling the bowel and bladder.

Folic acid is a man-made form of folate (a B vitamin that occurs naturally in food). Folic acid is used in supplements and added to some food products. Taking a folic acid supplement before and during the early days of your pregnancy is the best way to protect your baby. This applies to all women who are either pregnant or planning to get pregnant, whatever their age, and whether or not there is a history of spina bifida or other NTDs in the family.

- Folic acid protects unborn babies from serious birth defects like spina bifida.
- If you're pregnant, thinking of getting pregnant or you might get pregnant, you must make sure you're getting enough folic acid.

how to take folic acid

'Folic acid supplements are widely available in pharmacies, healthfood shops and supermarkets and cost as little as under £1 for a month's supply.'

You need to start taking folic acid as soon as you start thinking about having a baby. Your baby's spine will start to develop very soon after you've conceived, so it could be happening before you even realise you're pregnant. That's why it's also a good idea to take folic acid if there's any chance at all that you could get pregnant by accident.

The Department of Health recommends that you should take a supplement (tablet) containing 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid every day before you stop using contraception up until you are 12 weeks pregnant.

- Start taking a 400 mcg folic acid supplement every day before you stop using contraception.
- Carry on taking the supplement until you're 12 weeks pregnant.
- Don't worry if you're already in the early stages of pregnancy – taking a supplement could still help protect your baby.

making sure you're getting enough folic acid

It doesn't matter which brand of folic acid supplement you choose – just make sure each tablet contains 400 mcg of folic acid. This should be written clearly on the packet. 400 mcg can also be written as 400 µg or 0.4 mg. You'll only need to take one tablet a day.

Some multivitamins contain folic acid, but it's likely to be less than 400 mcg. Don't be tempted to try to make up the right amount by taking extra tablets – you could end up taking in too much of other vitamins and minerals.

The reason for taking a daily folic acid supplement is that it's unlikely that you could take in enough folate to protect your baby just from the food you eat. But it's still a good idea to eat a healthy, balanced diet that includes folate-rich foods such as granary bread, beans and pulses, and green vegetables such as broccoli and spinach. Look out for the symbol on some breads and breakfast cereals which shows they're fortified with extra folic acid.



high folate foods

Black-eyed beans, Brussels sprouts, beef and yeast extract, kale, spinach, granary bread, spring greens, broccoli, parsnips and chickpeas.

medium folate foods

Cooked soya and kidney beans, cauliflower, lentils, green beans, courgettes, green peppers, potatoes, iceberg lettuce, oranges, peas, orange juice, baked beans, bread, cabbage, yoghurt, eggs, brown rice and wholegrain pasta.

Warning: Liver and liver products are rich in folate but also contain high levels of vitamin A which could harm your baby. Avoid them if you're pregnant or planning to get pregnant.

'As well as taking a supplement, make sure you eat a healthy diet including foods that contain natural folate or are fortified with extra folic acid.'

faqs

why do i need to take a folic acid supplement?

It's very difficult to take in enough folate to protect your baby against NTDs just through the food you eat. Also, the folate in food can be destroyed by storing it for too long or overcooking. Taking a supplement is the only reliable way to make sure you're getting enough.

can folic acid harm me or my baby?

No. Because folic acid is water soluble, your body will use as much as it needs and get rid of the rest naturally.

i'm already pregnant. is it too late?

No. If you're still in the early stages of pregnancy, start taking folic acid straight away and carry on until you're 12 weeks pregnant. If you're more than 12 weeks pregnant, don't worry. Overall, the chances of your baby being born with an NTD are still slim. Talk to your doctor if you have any concerns.

are supplements hard to get hold of? and don't they cost a lot?

Folic acid supplements are widely available from pharmacies, healthfood shops and many supermarkets. And they're not expensive. It can cost as little as under £1 for a month's supply.

what if there's a history of spina bifida in my family?

If there's a history of spina bifida or another NTD in your family (or your partner's family), you'll need a higher dose of folic acid. This 5 mg (5000 mcg) dose is available on prescription from your doctor.

find out more

Ask your pharmacist or family doctor for advice if:

- you'd like to know more about folic acid
- you're already pregnant
- you're already taking medicine prescribed by your doctor, especially if it's to treat epilepsy
- you have spina bifida or there's a history of spina bifida or another NTD in your family or your partner's family, as you'll need a higher dose.
- if you're diabetic, as you may need a higher dose.

For more information about folic acid and planning a pregnancy, contact:

- your family doctor, practice nurse, health visitor or pharmacist
- NHS Direct on 0845 4647 or at www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

For more information about spina bifida and folic acid, contact:

The Association for Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus (ASBAH)
42 Park Road
Peterborough PE1 2UQ

telephone: 01733 555 988
Monday – Friday 10am – 4pm

Email: info@asbah.org
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