

# Guide for health professionals

## Frequently asked questions

### What is folate or folic acid?

Folate is a B-group vitamin that is essential for good health. Folate is naturally present in many foods. A form of folate, called folic acid, is used in dietary supplements and added to foods to enrich them. These are known as fortified foods.

### Why is folate important?

Our bodies need folate to make DNA and other genetic material. Folate is also needed for the body's cells to divide.

Folate is especially important in unborn babies because it helps the nervous system develop. In the very first weeks of pregnancy, the neural tube closes and fuses. The neural tube later becomes the baby's brain and spinal cord.

### What is a neural tube defect?

A neural tube defect, also known as a NTD, is more likely if mothers don't have enough folate in their bodies before getting pregnant and during the early weeks of pregnancy. Spina bifida is one type of neural tube defect. Taking extra folic acid as a supplement before getting pregnant and through the early weeks of pregnancy may reduce the chance of a baby developing a NTD. Not all cases of NTDs can be prevented, but taking folic acid is very helpful for most pregnancies.

### Who needs folic acid?

Folate cannot be stored in the body, so you need it in your diet every day.

Women and teenagers who might become pregnant within the next year need an extra 400 micrograms folic acid as a supplement (tablet) every day as well as eating a healthy diet.<sup>(1)</sup>

### How much folic acid do women need?

Women need 400 micrograms of folate a day.<sup>(1)</sup>

If a woman is pregnant, thinking of trying to have a baby or might become pregnant, it is important that she takes an extra 400 micrograms of folic acid as a supplement (tablet) daily from before she stops using contraception until the 12th week of pregnancy.

### At-Risk Groups

Some women may be at higher risk of having a baby with a neural tube defect and may need higher amounts of folate. Common reasons for increased risk include already having a baby with a neural tube defect or having a family history of neural tube defects. If your patient has a medical condition and is planning to get pregnant, she may need a higher dose of folic acid. Her GP can advise her if she needs extra and how much to take.

### Do women who are not planning a baby need folic acid?

Yes. Folate is an important nutrient for everyone and cannot be stored in the body, so women need it in their diets every day. If there is any possibility a woman could get pregnant, it is a good idea to take an extra 400 micrograms folic acid supplement daily because many pregnancies are not planned.

### **What foods are high in folate?**

The foods that have the most folate include: green leafy vegetables such as broccoli, brussels sprouts and spinach, salad greens such as rocket, chickpeas, nuts, orange juice, some fruits such as strawberries, bananas and oranges, dried beans and peas.

A healthy diet with a lot of vegetables, fruit and wholegrains is also rich in other important nutrients, and helps your body to absorb folate better. However, because folate is easily destroyed, it is very difficult to get all the folate you need to prevent neural tube defects through your diet.

Many types of bread, milk, breakfast cereals and other packaged foods contain added folate called folic acid. These are called folate-fortified foods. Check food labels and choose the brands that are folate-fortified.

### **How can a woman be sure that she gets enough folate every day?**

Folate is in many foods naturally, but it is very difficult to get all of the folate needed to prevent neural tube defects through diet.

If a woman could become pregnant, she needs to take a supplement of 400 micrograms of folic acid every day, as well as eating foods that are rich in folate.

Heating can destroy folate. Advise your patient if they are cooking any folate-rich vegetables it is best to microwave, stir-fry or steam them.

Many types of bread, breakfast cereals and other packaged foods contain added folate called folic acid. These are called folate-fortified foods. Women should check food labels and choose the brands that are folate-fortified.

### **Advice for patients**

**If you are planning to get pregnant, it is a good idea to:**

- Eat well;
- Get to a healthy weight;
- Be active; and
- Reduce your intake of alcohol, coffee and tea

from 3 months before you stop using contraception.

Enjoy lots of different nutritious foods every day to get the variety of vitamins and minerals you need for a healthy pregnancy.

<sup>(i)</sup> CLINICAL PRACTICE GUIDELINE-Nutrition for Pregnancy, Institute of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, Royal College of Physicians of Ireland, Directorate of Clinical Strategy and Programmes, Health Service Executive. August 2013

**Source:** Department of Health Folic Acid Advisory Group and Irish Nutrition & Dietetic Institute (INDI), June 2016.