

Health Promotion & Program Support

Women, Folic Acid & Babies

What's the Link?

Whether you plan to start a family soon or want children in the future, this fact sheet has valuable information for you.

Studies show that increasing the intake of folic acid before pregnancy reduces the risk of birth defects called Neural Tube Defects (NTDs). These birth defects affect the brain and spinal cord and may result in a serious disability, including paralysis or even death. One NTD you may know is spina bifida.

The key time to ensure you are getting enough folic acid is **before** you get pregnant. If NTD's occur, they happen in the first month of pregnancy, and most likely before you know you are pregnant! Since half of all pregnancies are unplanned, women need to get enough folic acid every day.

What is Folate and Folic Acid?

Folate and folic acid are forms of vitamin B. Folate is found naturally in food. Folic acid is man-made and found in vitamin supplements. The body can use either form and is needed for growth. This is why it is so important for pregnancy.

How Can I Get Enough?

1. Food you eat

Vegetables and fruit are among the best sources of folate. Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating suggests 5 to 10 servings of vegetables and fruit daily. Whole grain breads and cereals can also increase your folate intake. In Canada, white flour and enriched pasta are fortified with folic acid. Following the Food Guide can boost your folate intake.

Take note that overcooking and processing will destroy some of the folate in foods. To protect folate, store food in tightly covered containers, avoid excessive peeling and cutting of vegetables and fruit. Cook for short periods in as little water as possible.

2. Take daily vitamin supplements

All women, who could get pregnant, should eat a healthy, folate-rich diet and take a daily vitamin containing 0.4 mg of folic acid.

Taking a pre-natal supplement, will provide enough folic acid. You will not need an additional folic acid supplement. More than 1 mg per day is not safe.

Tips for Boosting Your Folate Intake

- Drink a glass of orange juice with your meal or as a snack.
- Use dark green lettuce and spinach in salad, instead of iceberg lettuce.
- Include favourite stir-fry veggies with your meal (e.g. Chinese cabbage, broccoli).
- Add spinach to prepared or homemade soups as a last minute folate booster.
- Try peanut butter with apple slices or celery sticks.
- Have eggs – any way you like them!

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Sources of Folate

Excellent Sources (contain 0.055 mg or more folate)		Good Sources (contain 0.033 – 0.054 mg folate)	
Asparagus (cooked)	4 spears	Avocado	1/4 fruit
Baked Beans with pork	165 mL (2/3 cup)	Beets (cooked)	125 mL (1/2 cup)
Beechnuts	125 mL (1/2 cup)	Boysenberries	125 mL (1/2 cup)
Belgian Endive (raw)	1 head	Bran breakfast cereals	50 mL (1/4 cup)
Black Beans (cooked)	125 mL (1/2 cup)	Broccoli (cooked)	125 mL (1/2 cup)
Broadbeans (fava) (cooked)	125 mL (1/2 cup)	Cantaloupe, honeydew melon	1/8 fruit
Brussel Sprouts (cooked)	125 mL (1/2 cup)	Cauliflower (cooked)	125 mL (1/2 cup)
Chestnuts (roasted)	10	Chinese Cabbage, (Pak-choi, Pe-tsai) (cooked)	125 mL (1/2 cup)
Collards (frozen, cooked)	125 mL (1/2 cup)	Corn-sweet (canned)	125 mL (1/2 cup)
Greens of turnip/mustard/ chicory (not beet) (cooked)	125 mL (1/2 cup)	Eggs (cooked in shell)	1 large
Kidney Beans (cooked)	125 mL (1/2 cup)	Filberts, hazelnuts (whole)	75 mL (1/3 cup)
Lentils (cooked)	125 mL (1/2 cup)	Lettuce, romaine	125 mL (1/2 cup)
Lima Beans (cooked)	125 mL (1/2 cup)	Orange	1 medium
Peanuts	50 mL (1/4 cup)	Orange juice-fresh or frozen	125 mL (1/2 cup)
Pinto Beans (cooked)	125 mL (1/2 cup)	Parsnips (cooked)	125 mL (1/2 cup)
Soy Flour (low fat)	50 mL (1/4 cup)	Peanut butter	30 mL (2 tbsp)
Soybeans (cooked)	125 mL (1/2 cup)	Peas (cooked)	125 mL (1/2 cup)
Sunflower seed butter	30 mL (2 tbsp)	Plantain (cooked)	250 mL (1 cup)
Sunflower seeds	50 mL (1/4 cup)	Tahini (sesame butter)	30 mL (2 tbsp)
Spinach (cooked) (raw)	125 mL (1/2 cup) 250 mL (1 cup)	Walnuts (halves)	125 mL (1/2 cup)
Wheat Germ (toasted/raw)	50 mL (1/4 cup)		
Yeast-brewers/baker's (dry)	5 mL (1 tsp)		

Source: Health and Welfare Canada, 1993

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