

Folic Acid Fast Facts

Q: What is folic acid?

A: Folic acid is a B vitamin that can help reduce the risk of neural tube defects (NTDs) by more than 70% if taken three months before conception and during the first trimester.

Q: What are NTDs?

A: NTDs are serious birth defects caused when the tissues that form the brain and spinal cord fail to develop properly.

Q: When do NTDs occur?

A: NTDs occur during the first four weeks after conception – before most women even know they're pregnant.

Q: Who should take folic acid?

A: All women who could become pregnant should take a daily multivitamin containing a minimum of 0.4 milligrams (mg) of folic acid. Since almost half of all pregnancies in Canada are unplanned, and NTDs occur before a woman even knows she's pregnant, all women of childbearing age should take folic acid.

Q: When should a woman take folic acid?

A: It's never too early to start taking folic acid. To help significantly reduce the risk of NTDs, a woman should take a daily multivitamin containing a minimum 0.4 mg of folic acid at least three months prior to conception and throughout the first three months of pregnancy.

Q: How much folic acid should a woman take?

A: Women should take a daily multivitamin containing at least 0.4 mg of folic acid. Women with a high risk for having a baby with an NTD should take more, based on a recommendation from a health professional.

Q: Where can a woman get folic acid?

A: In addition to taking a daily multivitamin, women should eat a healthy diet that includes foods high in folic acid like broccoli, asparagus, lentils and orange juice, and foods fortified with folic acid such as grain products, flour and cereals.

Q: Can a woman get all the folic acid she needs from food?

A: No. Even the best food choices will not supply all the folic acid needed. To reach the required intake, a woman must take a multivitamin containing at least 0.4 mg of folic acid each day.