

# Folic Acid for Women



Taking folic acid before pregnancy can reduce your chance of having a baby with spina bifida.

## Why should I take folic acid before pregnancy?

Taking folic acid before pregnancy and for the first three months of pregnancy can reduce your chance of having a baby with spina bifida.

## What is folic acid?

Most plant foods, especially green vegetables, wholegrain breads and cereals and peas and dried beans contain a B group vitamin called folate. Folic acid is the form of the vitamin that is found in vitamin tablets. Folic acid is also used to fortify some foods, such as some breakfast cereals. These cereal packets carry labels about their content of folic acid. Folic acid is converted into folate by the body.

## What should I do to increase my intake of folic acid?

If you are a woman of childbearing age, you should increase your daily intake of folate. The easiest and most effective way to do this is by taking a daily folic acid tablet containing 0.5 milligrams (mg) of folic acid, rather than relying on eating a lot of folate-rich foods.

A healthy diet is important. However, even if you eat well it is difficult to get enough extra folate. It is fine to take a folic acid tablet each day and also increase the folate in your diet. If you are taking a folic acid tablet you should not take more than one 0.5 mg tablet each day.

You need the extra folate for at least one month BEFORE you get pregnant and for the first three months of pregnancy. It can be difficult to plan when you may become pregnant, so we recommend that all women of childbearing age who could become pregnant take a folic acid tablet every day.





### How can I get folic acid tablets?

Folic acid tablets are available from pharmacies, health food shops and many supermarkets. You do not need a prescription to buy them and they are not expensive. Some multivitamins also contain folic acid. However, many multivitamins contain only 0.2 mg of folic acid, which is not enough to prevent spina bifida. Be sure to look for tablets containing 0.5 mg of folic acid.

### What is spina bifida?

Spina bifida is a serious abnormality of the spinal cord and the bones, muscle and skin which cover it. It happens as the spinal cord and brain are forming during the fourth week after conception (that is, the sixth week after the last period). This is often before a woman knows she is pregnant.

Babies with spina bifida usually have an obvious abnormality on their back. Sadly, some will die soon after birth. Spina bifida can cause permanently weak legs, lack of feeling in the legs and problems with walking. Many affected people will need a wheelchair. There can also be problems with bladder and bowel control.

### What are your chances of having a baby with spina bifida?

Any woman could potentially have a baby with spina bifida, even if there has never been a baby with spina bifida in the family before. About 1 in 1000 babies is born with spina bifida and another 1 in 1000 babies has another type of neural tube defect.\* Taking folic acid before pregnancy and for the first three months of pregnancy significantly lowers your chance of having a baby with spina bifida or other neural tube defect.

### What if I didn't take folic acid before I was pregnant?

If you have just missed a period and think you may be pregnant, it may still be worthwhile starting folic acid. Remember that your chance of having a baby with spina bifida is small and there are tests that can screen for it in early pregnancy. Most pregnant women are offered these tests. You can discuss these tests with your doctor.

### Is there anything else I should know?

There is no evidence that other vitamins/minerals will reduce your chance of having a baby with spina bifida. If you have epilepsy you should consult your doctor about the right dose of folic acid to take. If you have had a child with a neural tube defect\* or have a close family member with a neural tube defect, you should consult your doctor about the right dose of folic acid to take.

Taking folic acid before pregnancy may also lower your chance of having a baby with certain heart, kidney and limb abnormalities. The evidence for this is not as strong as for spina bifida and more research needs to be done.

### Where can I get advice and further information?

If you are thinking about becoming pregnant you can discuss the role of folic acid in preventing spina bifida with any of the following people:

your doctor

your pharmacist

a midwife

a women's health centre or family planning nurse or doctor

a dietitian or nutritionist

a Child and Youth Health doctor or nurse.

For detailed information you can refer to the National Health and Medical Research Council's revised statement on the relationship between dietary folic acid and neural tube defects such as spina bifida, at:

<http://www.health.gov.au/nhmrc/publications/statemnt/wh17stat.htm>

### Remember

**We recommend that all women of childbearing age who could become pregnant take a folic acid supplement daily.**

\*Neural tube defects (spina bifida, anencephaly and encephalocele) result from a problem with closure of the neural tube in early pregnancy. The neural tube is the structure from which the brain and spinal cord develop.



