

Where **kids** come first

# Folic Acid Supplements and Pregnancy



L'Hôpital de Montréal pour enfants  
The Montreal Children's Hospital

Centre universitaire de santé McGill  
McGill University Health Centre

**Up to 50 percent of all pregnancies are unplanned. This is why it is important for women of childbearing age, and especially women planning to have a baby, to take folic acid supplements.**

Evidence suggests if folic acid (also known as “folate”) is taken prior to and during early pregnancy there is far less chance your baby will be born with spina bifida, a neural tube defect. Neural tube defects are one of the most common congenital malformations, or birth defects. A neural tube defect is an abnormal opening along an infant’s spine, with or without protrusion of the spinal cord outside of the body (myelomeningocele). Neural tube defects can result in permanent damage to the spinal cord and spinal nerves causing varying degrees of paralysis and possible loss of bowel and bladder control. Another kind of neural tube defect is anencephaly where the brain is almost completely absent.

## **A balanced diet isn’t enough**

Some studies suggest up to 70 percent of neural tube defects could be prevented if women consumed 0.4 mg (400 micrograms) of folic acid every day. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to get enough folic acid from the foods you eat because folic acid levels are depleted when foods are stored, and are destroyed when foods are cooked. Sources of folic acid include leafy green vegetables, legumes (beans, peas), liver, whole wheat bread, fortified cereals, citrus fruits and juices.

Women on low carbohydrate diets who are curtailing their intake of fortified grains and cereals may not be getting essential vitamins and minerals, such as folic acid, which are necessary for health and well-being.



## How much folic acid do you need?

All women planning to become pregnant should take a daily supplement containing 0.4 mg to 1.0 mg of folic acid, beginning at least one and preferably three months before conception and continuing through the first three months of pregnancy. Many popular maternity vitamins contain this amount of folic acid. Women who have had a child with a neural tube defect should take a higher dose: 4 mg every day for at least three months prior to becoming pregnant. Women with juvenile diabetes and women with epilepsy should also take the higher dosage of these supplements.



To find out more  
about folic acid supplements,  
consult your health  
care professional  
(nurse, physician, etc.)



This information was prepared by the Pediatric Consultations Centre (PCC) of The Montreal Children's Hospital of the McGill University Health Centre.

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