



# FOLIC ACID

## Your “before pregnancy” vitamin!

Vitamins are the building blocks for all bodies. Who knows better than the tiniest bodies as they grow inside their mothers? They count on their mothers for nutrients for healthy tissues and bones. You can reduce the risk of defects of the brain or spinal cord (e.g. neural tube defects such as spina bifida) by getting enough folic acid *before* pregnancy and in the first few weeks of pregnancy. These defects may happen *before* you know you are pregnant.

Even *before* the sperm and egg meet, women need folic acid, one of the B vitamins. Folic acid helps boost the chances that a growing baby’s brain and spinal cord will form the way it should.

### *Defect threats*

- ❖ Problems of the spinal cord and brain are serious birth defects. A baby with these birth defects needs a lot of care and attention. They may have difficulty learning and with activities such as walking.
- ❖ For most women in Canada, the chance of having a baby with defects of the spinal cord and brain is 1 to 2 in every 1,000 births.
- ❖ If women get enough folic acid, the risk of having a baby with these birth defects is cut in half.
- ❖ Mothers who already have a child with a defect of the spine or brain may need extra folic acid.
- ❖ It is hard to get enough folic acid from the food you eat.
- ❖ Folic acid is an important part of the diet for any women who could become pregnant.

### *Folic acid for beginners!*

If pregnancy is in your future plans, eat foods rich in folic acid and take a vitamin containing folic acid every day.

**Food...** You can get some folic acid by enjoying several servings of foods rich in this vitamin every day. Choices include dark leafy green vegetables, beans, chick peas, lentils, wheat germ, nuts and seeds. Eating foods rich in folic acid is important, but it is not enough.

**Vitamin...** Take a multi-vitamin containing folic acid every day. Ask your pharmacist about the best vitamin for you. Start 3 months *before* pregnancy and keep taking folic acid throughout pregnancy and after the baby is born. Talk to your health care provider if morning sickness makes it hard to keep vitamins and food down during the early weeks of pregnancy.





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## *Some need more folic acid than others*

If you already have a child with a defect of the spine or brain, you may worry about this happening again. Talk to a genetics counsellor for advice. Women with diabetes, epilepsy, obesity, from higher risk ethnic groups (ie Sikh), or who already have a child with a defect of the spine or brain may need higher amounts of folic acid. In addition, women who have difficulty remembering to take medication, may not eat enough healthy food, or have history of alcohol, tobacco or drug use, may also require a higher amount of folic acid. Talk to your health care provider about the amount of folic acid that is right for you as you plan for pregnancy and in the three trimesters of pregnancy. Ask your pharmacist about the best way to get enough folic acid.

## *Am I getting enough folic acid?*

- ❖ I am taking a multi-vitamin with folic acid every day.
- ❖ I eat foods rich in folic acid every day.
- ❖ I will talk to my health care provider about folic acid.

### FOR HELP CLOSE TO HOME CONTACT:

Local public health unit: Call INFOnline at 1-800-268-1154 / 416-341-5518

Health care provider:

Pharmacist:

Genetic counsellor: Canadian Association of Genetic Counsellors or [www.cagc-accg.ca](http://www.cagc-accg.ca)

Dietitian: [www.dietitians.ca](http://www.dietitians.ca)

Folic Acid Alliance: [www.folicacid.ca](http://www.folicacid.ca)