



Folic Acid: An Important Nutrient During Pregnancy

January is National Birth Defects Prevention Month. Folic acid, also known as folate, is a B vitamin that helps prevent birth defects. Folic acid is important within the first three to four weeks of pregnancy, often before childbearing people know they are pregnant. Folic acid helps form the brain and spine, which is important for healthy development of a fetus during pregnancy. Low folic acid intake during pregnancy can lead to birth defects in the spine and brain. These defects are called neural tube defects and have lifelong effects.

To support healthy development of the fetus, people of childbearing age should consume 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid daily. Since more than half of the pregnancies in the United States are unplanned, experts recommend this value for both pregnant and non-pregnant individuals. Increasing folic acid intake during childbearing years can decrease the risk of problems for babies.

There are many ways to get the recommended amount of folic acid. You can get folate from a variety of foods. Leafy greens, beans, lentils, peas, eggs, citrus fruits, whole grains, seafood, and fortified foods are good food sources of folate. Fortified foods are foods that have added vitamins or minerals. Many grains, like rice, pasta, breads, and cereals, have folic acid added. If a food is fortified, it will say it on the package. Prenatal vitamins have the recommended amount of most vitamins and minerals for people who are pregnant, including folic acid. Combining a variety of healthy foods with a prenatal vitamin will provide the recommended daily amount.

For more information about folic acid, fortified foods, and neural tube defects, visit www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/folicacid/about.html.

Reference

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2018, October 29). *Folic Acid*. <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/folicacid/about.html>
National Council on Folic Acid. (2022). *Folic acid awareness week*. <https://www.folicacidinfo.org/>

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