

Women's Nutrition: Folate/Folic Acid¹

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A well-balanced diet with enough vitamins and minerals is an important part of a healthy lifestyle for everyone. But for some groups of people there are special recommendations for certain nutrients. One of these groups is women *capable of becoming pregnant*. To decrease their chance of having a baby with certain types of birth defects, women in this category need to consume enough of the vitamin called folate/folic acid *before* they become pregnant. This article provides information about the folate/folic acid needs of women who are capable of becoming pregnant, including its role in preventing birth defects, sources, and strategies for meeting the recommended intake. For general information about folate/folic acid for other healthy populations, see EDIS publication *Healthy Eating: Folate* (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fy066>).

What is folate/folic acid?

Folate is a general term used to refer to both forms of this B vitamin—food folate and folic acid. Food folate is found mostly in certain fruits, vegetables, and legumes. Folic acid, the man-made form of this vitamin, is added to certain foods and vitamin pills. This form of the vitamin is easier for the body to absorb compared to the natural form found in foods. Once absorbed, both forms of this vitamin are used for important body functions, including DNA synthesis. DNA is needed to make new cells to support growth and development during pregnancy and throughout the growing years. It also is needed to make new cells to replace skin, hair, blood, and other types of cells that are lost or damaged. For this reason, consuming enough folate is important for people of all ages.



Figure 1.
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What are the health benefits of folate/folic acid?

Folate/folic acid has been linked to reduced risk for heart disease (Wald, Law, & Morris, 2002), certain types of cancer (Larsson, Giovannucci, & Wolk, 2007; Oaks et al., 2010), and certain birth defects (Czeizel, 1998). Most notably, folic acid has been linked with a reduction in the risk for having a baby with a neural tube defect (NTD) (Czeizel, 1998; Wolff, Witrop, Miller, & Syed, 2009) or other birth defects

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