Nutrition Matters

Nutrition Services, Community and Health Services

What women need to know about folic acid

Take a multivitamin with folic acid if there is any chance that you could become pregnant. You and your future baby need the important health benefits of folic acid during the early stages of pregnancy.

Folic acid is a B vitamin needed for healthy growth. Although there are two forms of the B vitamin (folic acid and folate), this fact sheet will refer to both as folic acid.

> Since many pregnancies are unplanned, all women who could become pregnant should take a multivitamin with 0.4 mg (400 mcg) of folic acid every day.

Why is folic acid important?
During the first four weeks of pregnancy, folic acid plays a key role in the growth of a baby's spine, brain and skull. It is during this time that many women do not know they are pregnant yet.

Getting enough folic acid before becoming pregnant lowers the risk of birth defects called Neural Tube Defects (NTDs). Spina bifida and anencephaly are both NTDs that can cause serious disability, including paralysis or death.

Take a multivitamin daily
The time to make sure that you are getting enough folic acid is **before** you get pregnant.

Most women do not get enough folic acid from food alone so in addition a healthy diet based on *Canada's Food Guide*, take a multivitamin supplement with 0.4 mg (400 mcg) of folic acid every day.

Choosing a multivitamin
Use these tips when buying and taking a multivitamin:

- Choose one with 0.4 mg (400 mcg) of folic acid
- Do not take more than one per day unless prescribed by your health care provider
- Read label warnings since some may have cautionary notes for pregnancy
- To save money, buy the generic or "store-brand" version
- Take them for at least three months before getting pregnant
- If you find out your are pregnant, switch to a prenatal multivitamin

Include food sources of folic acid

Following *Canada's Food Guide* will help to meet your folic acid needs as well as other nutrient needs. Many foods have folic acid.

Include the following foods and beverages in this list to help get folic acid from your diet.

Vegetables and Fruit	
Asparagus	Okra
Artichoke	Oranges
Avocado	Orange juice
Beets	Papaya
Blackberries	Parsley
Broccoli	Parsnips
Brussels sprouts	Potatoes, with skin
Collards	Raspberries
Corn	Romaine lettuce
Endive	Seaweed
Escarole	Spinach
Green peas	Strawberries
Mustard greens	Turnip greens
Grain Products	
Bagels	Oatmeal
Bread	Pasta
Enriched cereals	Wheat germ
Milk and Alternatives	
Not a good source of folic acid	
Meat and Alternatives	
Beans	Soybeans, green (edamame)
Eggs	
Lentils	Soy nuts
Peanuts	Sunflower seeds
Other Foods	
Yeast extract spread (vegemite or marmite)	

Try theses meals and snacks ideas:

Breakfast

- Breakfast cereal or instant oatmeal with milk topped with mixed berries
- Fried egg sandwich and strawberries
- French toast and orange juice

Lunch and dinner

- Lentil or corn and black bean soup with whole grain crackers
- Chili with whole wheat toast
- Bean burrito
- Pasta with chicken and pesto sauce made with fresh parsley
- Hummus with whole wheat pita bread and baby carrots
- Baked salmon with roasted potatoes, Brussels sprouts and parsnips
- Spinach salad topped with strawberries and chick peas

Snacks

- Trail mix made with peanuts, soy nuts, sunflower seeds and dried fruit
- Smoothie made from blended frozen papaya, frozen raspberries, orange juice and yogurt

For more information

- EatRight Ontario: 1-877-510-5102 or www.eatrightontario.ca
- Health Canada: www.hc-sc.gc.ca (search: Canada's Food Guide or Healthy Pregnancy)
- York Region Community and Health Services *Health Connection*: 1-800-361-5653 (TTY 1-866-252-9933) or e-mail hc@york.ca
- York Region Community and Health Services website: www.york.ca/nutrition

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