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.

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 yet know they are pregnant.

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.

What you can do help get enough folic acid

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 to a healthy diet based on Canada’s Food Guide, take a multivitamin supplement with 0.4 milligrams (400 micrograms) of folic acid every day.

Use these tips when buying and taking a multivitamin:
• Choose one with 0.4 milligrams (400 micrograms) 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 you are pregnant, switch to a prenatal multivitamin

Include food sources of folic acid
Following Canada’s Food Guide will help you to meet your folic acid needs as well as other nutrient needs. Many foods contain folate, the form of the B vitamin found in food. Including the following foods in your diet will help ensure you get enough folic acid.

Vegetables
• Leafy greens like collards, endive, escarole, mustard greens, parsley, turnip greens, romaine lettuce, seaweed, spinach
• Green vegetables like artichokes, asparagus, broccoli, Brussel sprouts, green peas, okra
• Certain other vegetables like beets, corn, parsnips and potatoes, with skin
Fruit
- Oranges and orange juice
- Berries like blackberries, raspberries and strawberries
- Certain other fruit like avocado and papaya

Grain products
- Oatmeal and enriched cereals
- Bagels, bread and naan
- Pasta
- Brown rice
- Wheat germ

Milk and alternatives
- Not a good source of folic acid

Meat and alternatives
- Beans and lentils
- Eggs
- Peanuts
- Soybeans, green (edamame)
- Soy nuts
- Sunflower, seeds or butter

Other foods
- Yeast extract spread (vegemite or marmite)

Try these meal and snacks ideas:

Breakfast
- Breakfast cereal topped with sunflower seeds
- Oatmeal topped with blueberries and wheat germ
- Fried egg sandwich and strawberries
- French toast and orange juice
- Breakfast parfait including muesli or granola, yogurt and raspberries
- Sunflower seed butter on whole grain toast with orange slices
- Omelet made with spinach and feta cheese

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 and baby carrots
- Egg salad and spinach on whole wheat bread
- Baked salmon with roasted potatoes, Brussels sprouts and parsnips
- Spinach salad topped with strawberries, sunflower seeds and chick peas
- Stir-fry made with broccoli, bok choy or other favourite vegetables, edamame beans and teriyaki sauce over brown rice

Snacks
- Trail mix made with peanuts, soy nuts, sunflower seeds and dried fruit
- Smoothie made from blended frozen papaya, frozen raspberries, orange juice, wheat germ and yogurt
- Whole grain toast with vegemite

Where to find more information
York Region Public Health – york.ca/nutrition (see Healthy Eating for New and Expecting Mothers)
Best Start Resource Center – beststart.org
Health Canada – healthycanadians.gc.ca/pregnancy
EatRight Ontario - Speak to a registered dietitian at no cost by calling 1-877-510-5102 or by going to ontario.ca/eatright

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