



# The Folic Acid Message

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Folic acid is a B vitamin that prevents certain birth defects. Folic acid decreases blood levels of homocysteine and may reduce your risk for heart disease (such as heart attacks and strokes) and certain cancers.

The U.S. Public Health Service recommends that all women who are capable of becoming pregnant consume folic acid every day to reduce their risk of having a pregnancy affected with a neural tube defect (NTD). The major NTD's are spina bifida and anacephaly.

The most common neural tube defect is spina bifida. This defect involves incomplete formation of the spine. It may be covered by skin and only be evident by x-ray or may be very extensive with protrusion of the spinal cord, involving various degrees of paralysis and high risk for infection and meningitis. Since it occurs during pregnancy, there may also be orthopedic problems, such as clubfoot or dislocated hip. One out of every 2000 newborns in the U.S. has spina bifida. The average lifetime cost of spina bifida is \$532,000.00. The prognosis depends on the severity of the condition, however with proper care, many children do well.

Anacephaly is the absence of brain tissue. In the absence of brain tissue, there may be malformed cystic tissue that is either covered by skin or it may be exposed. An infant with anacephaly is either stillborn or dies within a few days.

Neural Tube Defects occur approximately 3-4 weeks after conception, before most women realize they are pregnant. Persons at risk for neural tube defects include those with high fevers in early pregnancy, maternal obesity, insulin-dependant diabetes, Hispanic origin, taking seizure medication and certain parental occupations (such as being a welder or agricultural worker).

Many things can affect your baby, including your family genes and things you may come in contact with during pregnancy. Taking the B vitamin, folic acid, can prevent 50-70% of neural tube defects. It may also help prevent birth defects of the lip, palate, and heart. Birth defects can happen in any family and some things are out of your control, but do what you can to reduce your risks.

All women of childbearing age should take a vitamin with 400 micrograms of folic acid every day. Do not take extra folic acid by taking more multivitamins, because taking too much of certain vitamins could harm you and your future baby.

Folic acid is also found in foods like leafy green vegetables, kidney beans, pinto beans, split peas, refried beans, chicken and beef liver, peanuts, and orange juice. Folic acid has been added to some foods, such as enriched breads, pastas, rice and cereals. Check the labels on your breakfast cereals. A few have 100% of the folic acid you need for the day. Always drink the milk in your cereal bowl to get all the nutrients, because the folic acid is sprayed on the cereal. Food sources are more difficult to metabolize, requiring more to achieve the same value as that taken in with the daily vitamin with 400 mcg. of folic acid.

If you have a child with spina bifida, have spina bifida yourself, or have had a history of pregnancy affected by neural tube defect, and are thinking about becoming pregnant, you need a higher dose of folic acid. Talk with your doctor about getting a prescription for the higher dose of folic acid (4000 mcg. or 4 milligrams (mg.) for 1-3 months before becoming pregnant and in early pregnancy is recommended.

Taking folic acid cannot guarantee that you will have a healthy baby, or that you won't have a stroke or heart attack, but it can help.

**“How you treat your body is an expression of love for yourself.”**