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WHY DO WE NEED FOLIC ACID?

Folic acid is a B vitamin found in vegetables, fruits, grain products, meat, and meat alternatives. It is needed for the growth and reproduction of all the body's cells. Women who have low levels of folic acid when they become pregnant, risk having a baby with birth defects such as spina bifida (a condition in which the back bone doesn't properly close around the spinal cord) and anencephaly (a malformation of the brain). Low levels can also affect red blood cell formation and lead to a type of anemia.

There are other reasons to make sure you get enough folic acid in your diet. High blood levels of an amino acid called homocysteine have been linked to heart disease and stroke. Studies have shown that taking folic acid lowers the level in both men and women. It has not been shown, however, that folic acid supplements can lower the risk of heart attack and stroke. Folic acid may also play a role in lowering the risks of other birth defects such as cleft lip and palate as well as some heart defects that babies can be born with. Folic acid may also help fight against some forms of cancer. More studies are needed to understand the connection to these health problems.

How much do I need?

Adult men and women need at least 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid daily. It is recommended that women of childbearing age have 400 mcg of folic acid from supplements or fortified foods in addition to the folic acid in the foods they eat to prevent spina bifida and many other birth defects. Women should get enough folic acid every day even if they are not thinking about getting pregnant, because by the time

they know they are pregnant, the baby's brain and spine are already formed. Using alcohol and taking oral contraceptives may increase your need for this vitamin.

Am I getting enough?

Two thirds of American women do not get enough folic acid in their diet. To make sure you are getting enough, eat a healthy diet that includes a variety of foods from all the food groups especially fruits, green leafy vegetables, dried beans, and legumes. "Enriched" grain products such as pasta, rice, bread, flour, and breakfast cereals have folic acid added and should be included in your diet. Having one cup of orange juice and one packet of enriched instant oatmeal for breakfast will provide 259 mcg of folic acid. This is more than half of the recommended daily amount for women. One cup of raw spinach provides 109 mcg while one cup of cooked dry pinto beans provides a whopping 294 mcg. If you feel that you do not get enough folic acid in the foods you eat, you may need to take a multivitamin supplement that contains 400 mcg of folic acid or an individual folic acid supplement of 400 mcg.

How much is too much?

Folic acid has no known harmful level. Even if you were to eat a diet rich in folic acid and eat a bowl of cereal that is enriched with 400 mcg of folic acid and take a multivitamin containing 400 mcg, there would still not be a problem with too much folic acid. It is suggested, however, that you get no more than 1000 mcg of folic acid a day from supplements, as large amounts can hide a rare vitamin B-12 deficiency. Your doctor can perform a simple test to check for B-12 deficiency.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/cddh/folic/folicfaqs.htm

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