



University of California  
Cooperative Extension  
Tulare County

Agriculture and Natural Resources



Prepared by: Cathi Lamp

## 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

The University of California, in accordance with applicable federal and state law and University policy, does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, disability, age, medical condition (cancer-related), ancestry, marital status, citizenship, sexual orientation, or status as a Vietnam-era veteran or special disabled veteran. The University also prohibits sexual harassment. Inquiries regarding the University's nondiscrimination policies may be directed to the Affirmative Action Director, University of California, Agriculture and Natural Resources, 1111 Franklin Street, 6<sup>th</sup> Floor, Oakland, CA 94607-5200. (510) 987-0096.



For special assistance  
regarding our programs,  
please contact us.

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>

# # #

Cooperative Extension programs are available to any individual or group without regard to race, color, national origin, sex, age or handicap. Named products are used for clarification and ease of discussion only and are not necessarily endorsed or promoted by the University of California Cooperative Extension.