

folic acid

Folic acid is a "B" vitamin your body needs every day to be healthy. It can reduce your risk of heart disease, colon cancer and stroke. If you take it before you become pregnant, it also greatly reduces your chances of having a baby with a birth defect of the brain or spine.

Folic acid helps the unborn baby's neural tube—the part that becomes the brain and spinal cord—develop properly. Certain birth defects of the brain and spine are called neural tube defects, or NTDs. One of the most common NTDs is spina bifida, which is a leading cause of children being paralyzed.

Health professionals recommend that all women who could become pregnant take at least 400 micrograms (400 mcg.) of folic acid per day. The rate of NTDs could be cut in half if women followed this guideline.

Folic acid is in many foods, but it can be hard to get the amount you need from diet alone. To be sure you get what you need, take a multi-vitamin every day with at least 400 micrograms of folic acid. You don't need a prescription; your pharmacist can help you select one that doesn't cost much. Or you can get the 400 micrograms of folic acid you need by eating a ready-to-eat breakfast cereal every day that has been fortified with this amount .

If you have epilepsy, diabetes or have a family history of NTDs, you may need more than 400 micrograms of folic acid every day. Talk with your doctor or health care professional before you get pregnant.

keep in mind...

- **Take a vitamin pill with at least 400 micrograms (400 mcg.) of folic acid every day. Or eat one of the breakfast cereals fortified with 400 micrograms (400 mcg.) of folic acid per bowl. Check the nutrition label.**
- **Folic acid has been added to some brands of bread, rice, flour, grits, corn meal, farina and pasta. Check the nutrition labels.**
- **Eat foods with folic acid in them, such as leafy green vegetables, beans, lentils, peanuts, asparagus, peas, and enriched-grain products.**

You may be surprised to learn that more than 60 percent of all pregnancies in California are not planned. It may also be news that many birth defects and other newborn health problems occur in the first few weeks after conception—when you may not even know you're pregnant.

A baby's health is strongly linked to the mother's health before pregnancy. That's another important reason for you to stay healthy. Whether or not you're planning to get pregnant, it's important to follow these guidelines:

- **Take a multi-vitamin with at least 400 micrograms of folic acid every day.**
- **Ask your doctor about your risk of diabetes.**
- **If you smoke, stop.**
- **Have a GYN exam annually.**
- **If you are being hurt by a partner or someone else, call a local shelter or crisis hot line. Also tell a health care worker you trust.**
- **Eat a variety of whole grains, fruits and vegetables every day and lower your intake of fat.**