

## When is the right time to begin taking extra folic acid?

Supplements of folic acid should be taken **before you become pregnant and for the first 12 weeks of your pregnancy.**

Even if you do not become pregnant for a while, taking folic acid cannot harm you. Your body automatically gets rid of any extra.

## What if I am already pregnant?

If you find out that you are pregnant and haven't been taking the supplement, it's still worthwhile to start taking folic acid and to keep taking it until the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy. If you are more than 12 weeks pregnant, try not to worry - most babies are born without a NTD.

## Where can I get the supplements?

Folic acid supplements are easy to swallow tablets. They cost between 2p and 4p a day and you can buy them from pharmacies, health food shops and some supermarkets. You may be able to get folic acid supplements on prescription but it is probably cheaper to buy them unless you are entitled to free prescriptions.

## Is 400 micrograms (400µg) enough for everyone?

The 400µg dose is enough for most people. But if you have diabetes, or if there is a history of NTDs such as spina bifida in your family, you will need to take a higher dose. Ask your doctor or pharmacist.

For more information about the benefits of taking folic acid, ask your doctor or pharmacist.

# Folic Acid



**Health  
Promotion  
Agency**

**Investing  
for Health**

**Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland**

18 Ormeau Avenue, Belfast BT2 8HS.

Tel: 028 9031 1611 (Voice/Minicom). Fax: 028 9031 1711.

[www.healthpromotionagency.org.uk](http://www.healthpromotionagency.org.uk)

01/08

**One of life's  
essentials**

# One of life's essentials

A lot of women know when they would like to have a baby. However, even if you are not planning a baby right now, it is important to be aware of the benefits of folic acid. Taking folic acid before you become pregnant can help protect your unborn baby from conditions such as spina bifida.

## What is folic acid?



Folic acid is a B vitamin that occurs naturally in the foods we eat every day.

Foods which contain folic acid include: peas, cabbage, parsnips, broccoli and oranges.

Extra folic acid is also added to some foods such as bread and breakfast cereals and they may carry this symbol.



Folic acid is also available as a vitamin supplement from your local pharmacy and some supermarkets.

## Folic acid - why it's important

Folic acid can help to protect your unborn baby against conditions such as spina bifida. Spina bifida can affect babies in different ways, for example, it may mean that they will be unable to walk or control their bladders. Spina bifida is one of the neural tube defects (NTDs) that can occur when the baby's spine or brain do not develop in the normal way.

Neural tube defects are higher in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the UK. Research has shown that by taking extra folic acid you can reduce the risk of your baby being affected by a NTD by approximately 70%.

## Who is at risk from having a baby with a NTD?

In Northern Ireland, approximately 2 babies a month are born with a NTD. So, if you're planning a baby or you could become pregnant, it's important you take folic acid:

- whatever your age;
- even if you're in good health;
- whether it's your first baby or you already have healthy children;
- even if there is no family history of NTDs such as spina bifida.

## How to get the right amount of folic acid

It is hard to get enough folic acid from food alone to protect your baby against NTDs. For example, you would need to eat over 500g (1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>lb) of Brussels sprouts every day!

To make sure you're getting enough folic acid to protect your baby, you should:

take a 400 microgram folic acid supplement every day (if you're unsure which one to buy ask your pharmacist)

and

eat more foods rich in folic acid, eg peas, cabbage, parsnips, broccoli and oranges

and

eat breads and breakfast cereals which have added folic acid - look out for the folic acid symbol

from before you become pregnant until the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy.