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Grains of Truth About Folic Acid

What is folic acid?

- Folic acid, also called folate or folacin, is a B vitamin often lacking in the diet.
- When consumed in adequate amounts by women before and during pregnancy, folic acid reduces the risk of serious birth defects of the brain and spine, called neural tube defects.
- Foliates also are needed for cell growth and blood production. As a fetus grows, it takes folates from the mother's blood, which in turn creates a shortage in the mother.
- Because of their control over homocysteine, an amino acid produced by the body, folates are thought to give some protection against heart disease. High levels of homocysteine in the blood may be a risk factor for heart attacks.
- Additional health benefits associated with folic acid consumption include reduction in depression, colon, cervical, and breast cancers. It also may help prevent memory loss and susceptibility to Parkinson's disease.

Where do I get it?

- Foods rich in folic acid include fortified breakfast cereals, enriched breads, pastas and grains, dried beans and peas, orange juice, oranges, cantaloupe, avocados, green leafy vegetables, broccoli, lima beans, nuts, and peanut butter.
- Some cereals are fortified with 100 percent of the recommended daily amount of folic acid.
- Effective Jan. 1, 1998, enriched grain products, such as white bread and flour, pasta and rice, were required to be fortified with folic acid.

Food	Folic Acid µg/Serving Dietary Folate Equivalents*(DFE)
Ready-to-eat breakfast cereal	100 – 400/serving; read labels
Enriched wheat tortilla	98/one 8" tortilla
Whole wheat tortilla	24/one 8" tortilla
Enriched white bread	39/slice
Enriched pasta, cooked	92/half cup
Whole wheat bread	14/slice
Whole wheat pasta	23/half cup
Lentils, cooked	180/cup
Black-eyed peas, dried, cooked	105/half cup
Pinto beans or chickpeas, cooked	140 – 145/half cup
Sunflower seeds, dry-roasted	152/half cup
Okra, cooked	37/half cup
Orange juice	60-100/cup
Spinach, raw	58/cup
Asparagus	110/5 spears
Collards, frozen	88/half cup
Grapefruit/pineapple juice	23/cup

*Dietary Folate Equivalents account for the folic acid content which is better absorbed than naturally occurring folate.



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How much do I need?

- Females of childbearing age need 400 micrograms from fortified foods and/or supplements daily in addition to what they get from food. Because spina bifida and similar birth defects occur in the first two weeks of pregnancy, women need to build up their folate stores long before they become pregnant. Once they realize they are pregnant, it is too late.
- Because 50 percent of pregnancies in the United States are unplanned, it is even more crucial for all women of childbearing age to continually consume large intakes of folic acid.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported a 26 percent decrease in the incidence of neural tube defects following folic acid fortification.
- Adult men and older women need 400 micrograms (μg) of folate.
- To obtain 400 micrograms per day through diet, eat according to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and include a highly fortified breakfast cereal. For individuals unable to get enough folic acid from the diet, a vitamin supplement is strongly recommended.
- Grain foods and breakfast cereals contribute over 62 percent of dietary folic acid, according to a study conducted by the Bell Institute of Nutrition.