

Folic acid is one of the B vitamins. It's found naturally in many foods and added to some manufactured foods such as fortified breakfast cereals.



Why is it important?

Folic acid helps babies develop. It helps prevent what are called neural tube defects, such as spina bifida, which are a cause of disability. If you are pregnant, planning to get pregnant or there is a chance you might become pregnant, you should take a supplement and eat more foods containing folate (the natural form of folic acid).

You are entitled to free vitamins, including folic acid, during your pregnancy. Ask your midwife.

With Healthy Start you can also get free vouchers for some food. See page 64, ask your midwife, or visit www.healthystart.nhs.uk

When should I take it and how much do I need to take?

Your baby's spine starts to grow very early in pregnancy – often before you even know you are expecting. This means it's important to make sure you're getting enough folic acid if you're hoping to get pregnant.

Currently it's recommended that you take a 400 mcg (0.4 mg) folic acid tablet every day before you get pregnant and for the first 12 weeks of pregnancy. You should also eat foods rich in folate (see right). Speak to your midwife if you have had a previous pregnancy with a neural tube defect, are on medication for epilepsy, or have diabetes, as you may need a higher dose, only available on prescription.

How do I get it?

You can buy folic acid supplements from chemists, supermarkets or health food shops, or your GP may prescribe them.

You should also eat foods containing folate, such as:

- green vegetables, particularly dark, leafy ones such as spinach, dark green cabbage, broccoli, peas and lettuce – steam rather than boil and be careful not to overcook as you will destroy some of the vitamins
- fortified breakfast cereals – some have extra folic acid added, so check the label
- oranges, berries, potatoes and lentils, which are also good sources of folate.