



folate bloomer

This B vitamin is a must-have for moms-to-be, but what about everyone else?

FOLATE IS THE POSTER CHILD of vitamins for expectant mothers—one specialist dubbed it “the molecular midwife.” But you don’t have to be supplementing for two to need more of it.

There are two forms of vitamin B₉: **Folate** is found naturally in food, while synthetically produced **folic acid** is used to fortify cereals and enrich grains. Studies have found that women who take adequate amounts of folic acid before conceiving a child can **reduce the risk of neural tube birth defects** like spina bifida by up to 70 percent. Women who are trying to conceive should add folate to their diet plus take 400 micrograms of folic acid per day and continue it through their pregnancy,

advises a 2005 report in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*.

What if you’re not sporting a “Baby on Board” T-shirt? Every body requires folate to help **generate red blood cells, heal wounds, build muscle, and produce certain chemicals for the brain and nervous system to function**. Yet most people have trouble reaching the recommended daily allowance of 400 mcg; in fact, it’s one of the most common vitamin deficiencies.

It’s better to be safe than sorry when it comes to folate. Your best bet: Add more folate-rich meals to your diet (see “The Folate Feedbag,” opposite page), but take a multivitamin just to be sure. Most multis contain 400 mcg folic acid; check the label.

new benefits for brain & heart

RECENT INVESTIGATIONS have given scientists a better idea of how valuable folate can be. A study at Wageningen University in the Netherlands found that **taking 800 mcg folic acid every day helped preserve brain function** in subjects ages 50 to 75; on memory tests, the supplement users had scores comparable to people five years younger.

Meanwhile, a report in the Archives of General Psychiatry suggested that a folate deficiency may trigger depression in some people. The researchers added that **supplementation might be useful to prevent depression among women**, although they didn't identify any specific amounts and cited the need for more research.

Folic acid **supplements can also reduce blood levels of homocysteine**, a risk factor for heart disease and stroke. The risk increases as homocysteine levels rise: Eight to 12 micromoles per liter is considered safe; 14 micromoles per liter or higher is thought to be dangerous. (A blood test can determine your numbers.) Consuming 350 to 400 mcg folic acid per day may prevent abnormal elevation of homocysteine levels, according to Kilmer McCully, M.D., author of *The Homocysteine Revolution*.

Folic acid is water soluble, which means your body excretes excess amounts through urine. However, most people should not take more than 1,000 mcg daily without medical supervision, says Roberta Anding, R.D., a dietitian and vitamin expert at Rice University in Houston. Too much folic acid can mask a B₁₂ deficiency, which is common in older adults. If you've already hit 50, ask your physician or naturopath to check your B₁₂ status before you take folic acid supplements.

—Matthew Solan

THE FOLATE FEEDBAG

The most natural way to bridge your folate gap is through your diet. Among the best sources of folate are dark green vegetables like spinach and broccoli. "The darker the green, the better," says Lynn B. Bailey, Ph.D., professor of food science and human nutrition at the University of Florida. Raw is superior to cooked, as heat often drains a vegetable of folate, she adds.

Another prime source of folate is orange juice. An 8-ounce glass of OJ has nearly 100 micrograms, about the same as 1 cup of raw spinach. "So you can get 50 percent of your daily folate need just from these two servings of food," says Bailey. Other excellent candidates: peanuts, legumes, avocados, black beans, and wheat bran.