



# Folic acid update

*You already know that this B-group vitamin is a mum-to-be's best friend for preventing birth defects – but that's not all it has to offer. Dr Sandi Rogers reports.*

## \* Folic acid? Or folate?

Folate is a B vitamin which is naturally present in fruits and vegetables. Folic acid is the synthetic version used in nutritional supplements and food fortification.

**F**OLIC acid supplementation – before conception and during pregnancy – prevents neural tube defects like spina bifida (which affects the brain, spinal cord or spine) and anencephaly (problems with brain and skull formation). Because these defects develop in the first month of pregnancy, when a woman may not even know she's pregnant, it's suggested that all women of child-bearing age take a folic acid supplement; it's also why many countries have introduced mandatory food fortification, including Australia. In Europe, where food fortification is not mandatory, some 5,000 pregnancies are affected by neural tube defects annually. Concerningly, a study of nearly half a million women attending antenatal screening between 1999 and 2012 in England and the Isle of Man found that just 31 percent took folic acid supplements before pregnancy.

## Additional benefits

Folic acid is associated with reduced rates of congenital heart defects, according to an American Heart Association study which examined the effects of folic acid food fortification in Canada. After analysing data from nearly six million Canadian births between 1990 and 2011, the researchers found folic acid fortification was associated with an 11 percent reduction in rates of congenital heart defects overall. This reduction more than doubled in certain subtypes. Children of women who take antiepileptic drugs during pregnancy may develop autistic traits, but it appears folic acid supplements can guard against this, a Norwegian study has found.

Brassica vegetables rank among the top 10 healthiest, giving you the most folate.

However, as with many things more is not necessarily better, with a study of 1391 women released in May 2016 revealing that excessive folate may increase the risk for autism. In new mothers who have high folate levels immediately after giving birth – more than four times the amount considered adequate – the child's risk of developing autism spectrum disorder doubles. This risk rises to 17.6 times where levels of both folic acid and B12 are high. Women who take excessive folic acid during pregnancy may also predispose their daughters to diabetes and obesity later in life, one study suggests. Animals fed around 20 times their recommended dose of folic acid gave birth to babies that became overweight and insulin-resistant as adults. Additionally, they grew up to be deficient in adiponectin – a hormone that protects against diabetes and obesity – and had irregular feeding behaviour. These symptoms were more pronounced in female adults. The babies of animals consuming the recommended folic acid dose grew into healthier adults.

Be sure to consult a qualified natural therapist if you are thinking about pregnancy to ensure you obtain the right amount of folic acid/folate from various sources, including fruits (mango, pomegranate, papaya, guava, kiwi, banana), vegetables (spinach, asparagus, cos or romaine lettuce, avocado, broccoli), legumes (black-eye peas and lentils), fortified foods; and supplements. The therapist may prescribe a B-complex supplement to support folic acid assimilation, or suggest eating foods rich in all the B-complex vitamins. \*

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