**Folic Acid Information leaflet**

**What is Folate and Folic acid**

Folate is a naturally occurring vitamin (known as vitamin B9). Folic acid is the man-made version of folate.

**What does folic acid do?**

Folate, with vitamin B12 help to make healthy red blood cells and help nerves to function properly. Folic acid is also important for DNA (genetic material) synthesis, allowing each cell to replicate perfectly.

**What happens if I don’t get enough?**

Folate deficiency can result in anaemia causing tiredness.

1. A lack of folic acid can also cause diarrhoea, loss of appetite, weight loss, headaches, heart palpitations, a sore tongue, and behavioural disorders.1
2. Folate deficiency in pregnancy increase the risk of the baby developing a spinal malformation or ‘neural tube defect’ called spina bifida.
3. Deficiency can occur if you are not getting enough folate in your diet or if requirements increase (such as in pregnancy). Sometimes you can become deficient due to loss of lots of folate (e.g., Crohn’s disease or untreated coeliac disease), if you are using some medications such as methotrexate or in alcoholism.

**How much folic acid do I need?**

1. We need around 200 micrograms of folate per day.1 Most of us should be able to obtain enough folate by eating a healthy diet containing a wide variety of foods.
2. During pregnancy, an additional 400 micrograms are needed, especially for the first 12 weeks of pregnancy to prevent spina bifida and other related problems in the baby. This is usually taken in the form of a supplement, as food may not be enough to obtain this required amount. Some conditions are treated with 5mg folic acid/day:

In confirmed folate deficiency

Pregnant women if they had a previous child with neural tube defects, if they are diabetic and if they are taking anti-epileptic medications.

People having treatment with methotrexate or anti-epileptics

People with active haemolytic disease.

**Good sources of folic acid:**

Folate is found naturally in a wide variety of foods and is also present in foods fortified with folic acid. You should aim to include 2-3 portions of these sources daily.

1. spinach, kale, brussels sprouts, cabbage, broccoli, asparagus,
2. cabbage, cauliflower, okra, lettuce, parsnips
3. beans and legumes (e.g., peas, blackeye beans)
4. yeast and beef extracts
5. oranges and orange juice
6. wheat bran and other whole grain foods
7. poultry, pork, liver, kidneys, and shellfish

fortified foods (e.g., some brands of breakfast cereals – check the label)

1. Moderate amounts of folic acid are also found in foods such as fresh fruit, nuts, cheese, yoghurt, milk, potatoes, bread, brown rice, oats, eggs, salmon, and beef

**TOP TIP**

Try not to overcook foods containing folic acid. As folic acid is a water-soluble vitamin (dissolves easily in water), it is lost from vegetables during cooking. Steam, stir fry or microwave vegetables to prevent them from losing too much folic acid.

**Summary**

Most of us (except those trying for pregnancy or has become pregnant) can get sufficient folate by eating plenty of vegetables, fruit, beans, and wholegrains.

Foods that are high in folate may protect against bowel cancer and heart disease.2

**Reference:**

1. BMJ Best Practice [Folate deficiency - Symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment |](https://bestpractice.bmj.com/topics/en-gb/823)  Updated: Jan 10, 2020
2. Food fact sheet, The British Dietetic Association (BDA). [www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts](http://www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts)

Written by Dr Shaheda Islam GP registrar 2021