

### Is folate useful if I am already pregnant?

The extra 5 mg of folic acid should be taken at least 1 month before pregnancy and for the first 3 months during pregnancy to help prevent a neural tube defect. By the time most women realise they are pregnant the critical time for formation of the neural tube has already passed. You may need to speak to a doctor or genetic counsellor about your situation.

### What should men do?

Men who have spina bifida or a family history of neural tube defects should make sure that any female partner knows about their increased risk and the importance of folate in prevention.

### Are there any tests for spina bifida or other neural tube defects during pregnancy?

Ultrasound by a doctor who has specialised in foetal ultrasound can detect anencephaly from around 11 weeks and most cases of spina bifida from around 18 weeks. Occult spinal dysraphism and mild cases of spina bifida can be more difficult to detect.

### Does folic acid help with other birth defects?

Folic acid supplementation has been shown to benefit other congenital anomalies, such as congenital heart defects, urinary tract anomalies, oral facial clefts, limb defects, and pyloric stenosis.

### Do any drugs reduce the benefit of folic acid?

Some drugs, known as folic acid antagonists, will reduce the effectiveness of folic acid. The most common folic acid antagonist is methotrexate, but women should check with their doctor if they are taking any medication.

*For further information on folic acid please contact your local doctor, hospital spina bifida clinic or SBH Queensland.*



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# You and your pregnancy

If you have **spina bifida**, or someone in **your family has been affected** by a neural tube defect such as

- ♦ **Spina bifida**
- ♦ **Anencephaly**
- ♦ **Occult spinal dysraphism**
- ♦ **Encephalocele**

then you have a higher risk of having a child with a neural tube defect.

*To minimise this risk you will need a higher than normal intake of folic acid*



***How can I reduce the risk?  
To reduce the likelihood of  
having a baby with a neural  
tube defect, it is recommended  
that you take 5 mg of folic acid  
daily if it is possible you could  
become pregnant. This amount  
is 10 times the dose for women  
at a lower risk.***

### **What are neural tube defects?**

Neural tube defects include anencephaly, spina bifida, encephalocele and other forms of spinal dysraphism. They occur when the neural tube in the developing baby fails to form properly during the 4th week of pregnancy.

### **Who is at increased risk of having a baby with a neural tube defect?**

- ⇒ Men and women with a neural tube defect such as spina bifida or occult spinal dysraphism
- ⇒ Couples who have already had a pregnancy affected by a neural tube defect
- ⇒ Men and women who have a close blood relative with, or a family history of, a neural tube defect

⇒ Women taking medication for epilepsy, particularly sodium valproate

⇒ Women with type 1 diabetes

### **What are the risks?**

In Australia approximately 1 in every 800 pregnancies is affected by a neural tube defect\*

### **Are you at higher risk?**

If you have had one child or pregnancy with a neural tube defect

⇒ The risk is about 1 in 20

If have had two children or pregnancies with neural tube defects

⇒ The risk is about 1 in 8

If you or your partner have a neural tube defect

⇒ The risk is about 1 in 25

If you are a sibling of someone with an neural tube defect

⇒ The risk is about 1 in 50

If you are the aunt or uncle of someone with a neural tube defect

⇒ The risk is about 1 in 100

### **What is folic acid or folate?**

Folate is a B vitamin which occurs naturally in a number of foods. Folic acid is the artificial form of the vitamin.

### **Will folic acid prevent all neural tube defects**

Folate or folic acid cannot prevent all neural tube defects, but it does reduce the risk by up to 70%. If your risk was 1 in 10 before taking folic acid, it will be 1 in 33 after taking it.

### **Will I reduce my risks further if I take more than 5 mg a day?**

Taking more than 5 mg a day has not been shown to provide any extra benefits.

### **What happens if I take too much?**

Folic acid is water soluble and excreted naturally from the body. Studies have shown that a daily dose of 10 mg has not had any adverse effects on adults.

### **Do I need to take the tablets throughout pregnancy**

The extra folic acid is needed only when the neural tube (which becomes the central nervous system) of the baby is forming - around the first 3 - 4 weeks of pregnancy.

### **Can I get the required amount through food**

Even if you ate food fortified with folic acid as well as foods rich in folate you would not be able to eat the amount of food required to get 5 mg of folate each day .

\* AIHW Neural Tube Defects in Australia: Prevalence before mandatory folic acid fortification