

# Frequently Asked Questions

## What is spina bifida?

Spina bifida is a birth defect that involves incomplete formation of the spine. One out of every 1000 newborns in the United States has spina bifida. It is the most common neural tube defect, a group of serious birth defects of the brain and spinal cord. These birth defects occur during the first month of pregnancy. This is *before most women know they are pregnant*.

## Who is at risk for having a child with spina bifida?

All women who could become pregnant are at risk for having a pregnancy affected by spina bifida. Women who have

- a child with spina bifida
- spina bifida themselves
- already had a pregnancy affected by any neural tube defect

are at greater risk of having a child affected by spina bifida or another neural tube defect.

## What can I do to reduce my risk of having a child with spina bifida?

Taking the B-vitamin folic acid every day can help reduce your chances of having a child with spina bifida; however it is not a guarantee. Many things can affect a baby, including your family genes and things you may come in contact with during pregnancy. Taking folic acid every day reduces the risk of spina bifida and other neural tube defects.

## What is folic acid?

Folic acid is a water soluble B-vitamin that helps build healthy cells. Your body uses it every day to maintain your health. "Water soluble" means it does not stay in your body for very long, so you need to take it every day to help keep you healthy and prevent neural tube defects like spina bifida in the future.

## Where can I get folic acid?

There are two different forms of folic acid:

### 1.) synthetic form

- multivitamins
- fortified bread and grain products like breakfast cereals
- folic acid prescriptions for women who are at greater risk

### 2.) natural form, "folate"

- foods like leafy green vegetables or orange juice.

Our bodies absorb the synthetic form of folic acid more easily than the natural form so you can't depend on food alone to get the folic acid that you need. It's important to take a multivitamin with folic acid every day. You can buy multivitamins over-the-counter at any grocery or drug store.

## How much do multivitamins with folic acid cost?

Multivitamins don't cost much. On average, taking a multivitamin costs about \$0.03 a day. This is less expensive than eating fortified bread and grain products like breakfast cereals (about \$0.35 a day) or eating foods that have the natural form of folic acid (about \$3.00 a day).

## Does it matter what brand of multivitamin that I buy?

Brand doesn't matter. All multivitamins that are manufactured in the US must meet a certain minimum standard of quality established by US Pharmacopeia (USP). Having the USP standard means that all multivitamins have the same quality vitamin in them.

## How much folic acid do I need?

All women of childbearing age should take a vitamin with 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid every day. (This amount is also written as 0.4 milligrams (mg).) Most multivitamins have this amount of folic acid in them. Check the label to be sure that it contains 400 mcg or 0.4 mg or 100% RDA (Recommended Daily Allowance). All women should take this amount every day even when they are not planning to become pregnant.

If you're at higher risk for having a pregnancy affected by a neural tube defect, and you are thinking about becoming pregnant, you should take 4000 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid by prescription for 1 to 3 months before becoming pregnant. (This amount is also written as 4.0 milligrams (mg).) Taking this amount of folic acid by prescription may reduce the chance of a neural tube defect like spina bifida in future pregnancies.

## If I need more folic acid, can I just take more multivitamins?

Do not take extra folic acid by taking more multivitamins. Too much of some of the other vitamins in the multivitamin tablet could harm you and your future baby.

## Can I just eat healthy foods and get my folic acid that way?

While a good diet is important, your body absorbs the synthetic form of folic acid in a vitamin better than the natural form or "folate" found in foods. Do not depend on food alone to get the folic acid that you need. To get the folic acid that you need, take a multivitamin with folic acid every day.

## Some foods say that they have folic acid added to them. Can I eat more of them to get the folic acid that I need?

Because most people don't get enough folic acid, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) requires fortification of breads and enriched cereal grain products with synthetic folic acid. All U.S. wheat, rice and corn products are fortified. Some products are fully fortified with all the folic acid that you need for the day or 100% RDA (Recommended Dietary Allowance). The RDA for folic acid is 400 mcg. (This amount is also written as 0.4 mg.) Other products only have some of the folic acid that you need for the day. The amount of folic acid in a fortified product is often written on the packaging. The easiest way to be sure that you are getting the folic acid that you need daily is to take a multivitamin with folic acid every day.

## What does research on folic acid say?

Studies have shown that if all women who could become pregnant were to take a multivitamin with the B-vitamin folic acid, the risk of birth defects like spina bifida could be reduced by up to 70%. This means that some women can do everything right and still have a baby with a birth defect like spina bifida. These women are at higher risk for having a child with spina bifida in the future. Research has shown that 4000 micrograms of folic acid reduces the risk of birth defects for these women. For women at higher risk for spina bifida, this increased level of folic acid is recommended by prescription.

## How can I make folic acid part of my daily routine?

Start taking your folic acid at the same time as you do another activity that you will do every day like when you:

- brush your teeth
- drink your coffee
- eat lunch
- feed the dog
- listen to the news

This way your other daily activity will remind you to take your folic acid. It doesn't matter when you take folic acid during the day, at a mealtime or before your favorite news TV show. Soon, taking folic acid will be a daily activity too.