Fact Sheet

Folic acid helps prevent birth defects and build new cells daily

You already know what you need to live a healthy lifestyle – fruits and vegetables, exercise, sunscreen, adequate sleep – but did you know you also need folic acid? Women who talk to their health care provider about getting pregnant will undoubtedly be advised to take 400 micrograms of folic acid daily, but the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says every woman should take folic acid.

Folic acid is a B vitamin that the body uses to make new cells daily – cells for fingernails, hair, skin, and other parts of the body. Folic acid can also help prevent major birth defects in a newborn's brain and spine. These birth defects generally happen in the first few weeks of pregnancy, usually before a woman even realizes she is pregnant. Folic acid works best to protect newborns if a woman takes it at least one month before getting pregnant, but since about half of the pregnancies in the U.S. are unplanned, the CDC recommends all women take folic acid on a regular basis.

Folate is a form of folic acid that is found in dark green leafy vegetables, citrus fruits and juices, and beans (foods like orange juice, grapefruit, broccoli, spinach, asparagus, lentils and peas). The CDC says the body does not use folate as easily as folic acid and it may not have the same benefits as a man-made synthetic folic acid vitamin. Some fortified breakfast cereals also contain 100% of the daily value of folic acid. Check the label on the side of the box. Most basic multivitamins sold in the U.S. also have the amount of folic acid women need each day. The label should state the vitamin contains 100% of the daily value (DV) of folic acid. The best way to make sure you get enough folic acid is to take a multivitamin with 400 micrograms of folic acid and eat healthy foods.

For more information about folic acid, or about how to ensure a healthy pregnancy and a healthy infant, contact the knowledgeable staff at the Phelps-Maries County Health Department's Women, Infants and Children Program (WIC).

Learn more at the Phelps/Maries County Health Department. Caring for your family, caring for our community, caring for YOU!

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