Folic Acid: A Daily Vitamin to Prevent Birth Defects

Importance of Folic Acid

Folic acid is a B vitamin needed by the body to make new cells. A growing baby needs folic acid to help properly form its brain and spine. By taking 400 mcg of folic acid daily, a mother can help prevent major birth defects like spina bifida and other neural tube defects.

When to Take Folic Acid

It is recommended that all women of child-bearing age take folic acid daily. Folic acid is most effective at preventing birth defects during the first few weeks of a pregnancy when the spine and brain are developing. Many pregnancies are unplanned, and by the time a woman realizes she is pregnant it might be too late in the pregnancy to prevent defects.

How to Obtain Enough Folic Acid

The two easiest ways to ensure adequate folic acid intake are to take a vitamin containing folic acid daily or to eat a bowl of cereal containing the daily recommended amount of folic acid. Before purchasing a vitamin or breakfast cereal, check the label to make sure the product contains 400 mcg or 100% of the daily value of folic acid. Most store brand multi-vitamins contain the recommended amount of folic acid and are available at a low cost. For women that are unable to swallow pills, folic acid is available in the form of liquid and chewable multi-vitamins.

Remembering to take a vitamin daily can be challenging. Setting a cell phone alarm or placing the container of vitamins near your toothbrush can serve as a daily reminder.

Folate vs. Folic Acid

Folate is the natural form of folic acid found in foods such as dark leafy greens, broccoli, citrus, whole grains, and beans. It is harder for the body to utilize folate than folic acid.

The 400 mcg of daily folic acid should be consumed in the form of synthetic folic acid. Synthetic folic acid is the man-made form found in over-the-counter vitamins, breakfast cereals, and foods labeled “enriched” like bread or pasta. When looking at package labeling, folic acid means the same thing as synthetic folic acid.

“Approximately 2,500 infants are born each year in the U.S. with a neural tube defect. About half these cases are thought to be related to inadequate folic acid intake by the mother.”

- www.fda.gov

For more information on folic acid visit: www.cdc.gov or www.folicacidinfo.org