

Nutrition Nuggets: Should I Take Folic Acid Supplements?

by Delisa Renideo

Many of us have heard that it is essential for pregnant women to take prenatal vitamin supplements that contain folic acid to prevent the occurrence of birth defects of the brain and spinal cord (neural-tube defects) such as spinal bifida. This tragic defect causes a baby to be born with a spine that is not closed, so the nerves are exposed, which can lead to paralysis, incontinence, and sometimes mental retardation. This can result from the mother's lack of folate in her diet, so health authorities have recommended that women take a folic acid supplement. But is this the best advice?

People sometimes use the words "folate" and "folic acid" interchangeably, but they shouldn't. Folate is a naturally occurring nutrient in the B Vitamin family and is found in many plant foods, especially green vegetables and beans. Folic acid, on the other hand, is a synthetic version of folate and is not found in natural foods at all. It is synthesized and added to supplements and is also added to refined, enriched grain products, like bread, pasta, and white rice in an effort to replace some of the nutrients that were removed during processing.

The problem is that folic acid does not do the same job that foods containing folate do. For one thing, folate is only one of thousands of nutrients found in vegetables, so singling out just one nutrient cannot possibly provide the same benefit as the symphony of nutrients found in whole foods. In addition, many studies have indicated that men and women who supplemented with folic acid had an increased risk of several cancers, including breast, prostate, and colorectal. In contrast, those consuming naturally occurring folate in their foods had a reduced incidence of breast and prostate cancer.

In addition, children born to women who took folic acid supplements during pregnancy have a higher incidence of childhood asthma, infant respiratory tract infections, and cardiac birth defects. In contrast, children born to women who consumed diets containing folate-rich plants and who did not take folic acid supplements had a lower incidence of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and less childhood cancers!

Rather than recommending that women take prenatal vitamins containing folic acid to prevent spinal bifida, it would be far better to recommend that they eat a diet rich in vegetables and beans. Not only would this help prevent the occurrence of neural-tube defects, but this nutrient rich diet would provide the basis for a healthy immune system for both mother and baby.

Our culture has lost sight of the importance of eating nutrient-rich foods like beans, vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and nuts and seeds to provide what we need for health. Instead, we've come to believe that we need to take pills for both prevention and treatment of problems that could be avoided by simply following a healthy plant-based diet. We've come to trust pills, and not to trust the healing powers of food. We've got it backwards! When I hear people saying they are taking lots of supplements*, "as insurance," I want to tell them that the best way to insure great health is to eat a nutrient-rich, plant-based diet.

** However, it is important to take B12 supplements because there is not adequate B12 in most people's diet. (B12 is made by bacteria, not by plants or animals.) Most people also need to supplement with Vitamin D as well, as this vitamin is made in our skin when exposed to the sun and most of us are indoors and not in the sun very much, or live in northern climates where we don't get much sun in the winter.*

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