Folic Acid

This sheet talks about exposure to folic acid in a pregnancy and while breastfeeding. This information should not take the place of medical care and advice from your healthcare provider.

What is folic acid?
Folic acid is available as a nutritional supplement. It is the lab-made form of the vitamin folate (vitamin B9). Folate is necessary for making and maintaining healthy cells in the body.

Many foods contain folate. These foods include dark leafy greens, asparagus, broccoli, avocado, beans, carrots, squash, nuts and citrus fruits. Folic acid is added to some foods to increase their nutritional value. In the United States, folic acid is added to cereal, wheat flour, corn meal, rice, and many types of bread and pasta. Many other countries also supplement wheat and maize flour with folic acid.

I take folic acid. Can it make it harder for me to get pregnant?
Studies have not suggested that folic acid would make it harder for a woman to become pregnant. It has been recommended that women should take a daily supplement of folic acid at least one month before getting pregnant.

I just found out I am pregnant. Should I stop taking folic acid?
Talk with your healthcare provider. Taking folic acid before and during pregnancy lowers the chance of a baby having a birth defect of the brain and spinal cord known as a neural tube defect. Taking folic acid might also lower the chance of other birth defects.

Does taking folic acid increase the chance for miscarriage?
Miscarriage can occur in any pregnancy. There is no evidence that folic acid increases the chance for miscarriage. One study suggested that folic acid might help to lower the chance of miscarriage.

Does taking folic acid increase the chance of having a baby with a birth defect?
In every pregnancy a woman starts out with a 3-5% chance of having a baby with a birth defect. This is called her background risk. Taking folic acid before and during pregnancy can lower the chance of certain types of birth defects.

Could taking folic acid cause other complications during pregnancy?
Folic acid has not been linked to pregnancy complications. In fact, taking folic acid might decrease the chance of some pregnancy complications such as delivery before 37 weeks of pregnancy (preterm delivery) or getting high blood pressure during pregnancy.

How much folic acid should I be taking?
Starting at least one month before a pregnancy, the recommended daily amount of folic acid is 400 micrograms (mcg), or 0.4 milligrams (mg). During pregnancy, the recommended daily amount is 600-800 mcg. If you have had a baby with a neural tube defect before, your healthcare providers may recommend that you take extra folic acid. Discuss how much folic acid you should take with your healthcare providers.

Most people can get enough folic acid by eating foods high in folate or folic acid and by taking a multivitamin with folic acid.

Some people have problems getting enough folate. There can be different reasons for this. Some medications can lower the amount of folic acid in the body. Diseases of the intestines can interfere with folic acid use by the body.
Drinking large amounts of alcohol can lower folate levels in the body. Some people have a gene change which can prevent the body from using folic acid as it should. There are other forms of lab-made folate, such as L-5-methyltetrahydrofolate (also called L-methylfolate), which might work better for some people. Ask your healthcare provider if any medications that you take or other medical conditions that you have can affect the amount of folic acid in your body. They can go over the right dose and form of folate for you.

Can I breastfeed while taking folic acid?

Folic acid is naturally found in the breast milk of women who are well-nourished. While breastfeeding, it is recommended that you consume 500 mcg (0.5 mg) of folic acid every day. Your baby gets folic acid from your milk, so it is important that you have enough folic acid while breastfeeding. Talk to your healthcare provider about all of your breastfeeding questions.

What if the father of the baby takes folic acid?

Some studies have suggested that folic acid is needed to make healthy sperm. The recommended amount of folic acid for men is 400 mcg/day (0.4 mg/day). Most men get enough folate from their diet alone, but if your partner is concerned about his intake, he could talk to his healthcare provider about taking a multivitamin. For more information on paternal exposures in general, please see the Paternal Exposures fact sheet at https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/paternal-exposures-pregnancy/.

Please click here for references.