

This fact sheet explains the Task Force's draft recommendation on folic acid supplementation to prevent neural tube defects. It also tells you how you can send comments about the draft recommendation to the Task Force. Comments may be submitted from May 10 through June 6, 2016. The Task Force welcomes your comments.

## Folic Acid Supplementation to Prevent Neural Tube Defects

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (Task Force) has issued a **draft recommendation statement** on *folic acid supplementation to prevent neural tube defects*. The Task Force recommends that all women who can become pregnant take a daily folic acid supplement.

This draft recommendation statement applies to women who are planning, or who could become, pregnant. It does not apply to women who have had a history of pregnancies with neural tube defects.

What is folic acid?

Folic acid is the man-made form of folate, a vitamin found in fruits, vegetables, and many other foods.

What are neural tube defects?

What are neural tube defects? Neural tube defects are birth defects of the brain, spine, or spinal cord.

### Facts about Neural Tube Defects

Neural tube defects develop during the first month of pregnancy, often before a woman even knows she is pregnant. The two most common types of neural tube defects are spina bifida and anencephaly. In spina bifida, the unborn baby's spine does not close completely to protect the spinal cord. In anencephaly, most of the brain and skull do not develop. Babies with anencephaly die before or shortly after birth.

Any woman who could become pregnant is at risk for neural tube defects. However, having a previous pregnancy with a neural tube defect, or having a female relative who had a baby with a neural tube defect increases the risk. Other risk factors include taking certain anti-seizure medications, diabetes during pregnancy, obesity, and problems with the genes that regulate folate.

### Facts about Folic Acid

Folate and folic acid are a type of B vitamin. Every cell in the body needs this vitamin for normal growth and development. Folate is the form that is found naturally in foods such as fruits and vegetables, nuts, beans, poultry and meat, eggs, and grains. Folic acid is the man-made form of the vitamin that is added to packaged foods such as breads, cereals, and other grain products and also made into supplements.

Even though folate and folic acid are found in a wide range of foods, most women do not get the recommended amount in their diets. Having enough folate in the body when pregnancy first begins helps ensure that the baby's neural tube develops normally.

## Potential Benefits and Harms of Folic Acid Supplementation to Prevent Neural Tube Defects

The Task Force looked at research on the potential benefits and harms of taking a folic acid supplement to prevent neural tube defects. It found convincing evidence that a daily supplement of between 400 and 800 micrograms of folic acid before and during pregnancy can help protect against the development of neural tube defects.

Because half of all pregnancies in the United States are unplanned, the Task Force suggests that all women who could become pregnant, as well as those who are planning a pregnancy, take a folic acid supplement.

The Task Force also looked at harms of taking a folic acid supplement and found that taking folic acid is unlikely to be harmful for the mother or baby.

## The Draft Recommendation on Folic Acid Supplementation to Prevent Neural Tube Defects: What Does It Mean?

Here is the Task Force's draft recommendation on folic acid supplementation to prevent neural tube defects. It is based on the quality and strength of the evidence about the potential benefits and harms of screening for this purpose. It is also based on the size of the potential benefits and harms. Task Force recommendation grades are explained in the box at the end of this fact sheet.

Before you send comments to the Task Force, you may want to read the full [draft recommendation statement](#). The recommendation statement explains the evidence the Task Force reviewed and how it decided on the grade. An [evidence document](#) provides more detail about the scientific studies the Task Force reviewed.

The USPSTF recommends that all women planning or capable of pregnancy take a daily [supplement](#) containing 0.4 to 0.8 [mg](#) of [folic acid](#). **Grade A**

### Notes

#### [supplement](#)

Supplements are vitamins or minerals added to the diet. They can be taken in pill, capsule, tablet, or liquid form.

#### [mg](#)

Milligram is a measure of weight. A bottle of folic acid supplements may be labeled in micrograms (mcg) instead of milligrams. 0.4 to 0.8 mg is the same as 400 to 800 mcg.

#### [folic acid](#)

The man-made form of folate that is made into supplements and added to packaged foods.

## What is the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force?




The Task Force is an independent, volunteer group of national experts in prevention and evidence-based medicine. The Task Force works to improve the health of all Americans by making evidence-based recommendations about clinical preventive services, such as screenings, counseling services, and preventive medicines. The recommendations apply to people with no signs or symptoms of the disease being discussed.

To develop a recommendation statement, Task Force members consider the best available science and research on a topic. For each topic, the Task Force posts draft documents for public comment, including a draft recommendation statement. All comments are reviewed and considered in developing the **final recommendation statement**. To learn more, visit the [Task Force Web site](#).

### USPSTF Recommendation Grades

Grade	Definition
A	Recommended.
B	Recommended.
C	Recommendation depends on the patient's situation.
D	Not recommended.
I statement	There is not enough evidence to make a recommendation.

## Click Here to Learn More About Folic Acid and Neural Tube Defects

-  **Get Enough Folic Acid**  
(healthfinder.gov)
-  **Folic Acid Fact Sheet**  
(womenshealth.gov)
-  **Neural Tube Defects**  
(MedlinePlus)

## [Click Here](#) to Comment on the Draft Recommendation



The Task Force welcomes comments on this draft recommendation.



Comments must be received between May 10 and June 6, 2016.



All comments will be considered for use in writing final recommendations.