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# FOLIC FIGHTERS

## Folic acid is essential for a healthy pregnancy and baby...

Folic acid is the only supplement recommended to take when planning a baby and during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy in the UK. This is because it can significantly reduce the risk of babies born with neural tube defects (NTDs) such as anencephaly and spina bifida. It is estimated that around 500 pregnancies in the UK every year are affected by these and they can affect an embryo very early in pregnancy.

### WHAT ARE NEURAL TUBE DEFECTS?

NTDs are one of the most common birth problems resulting in infant mortality and serious disability. Folic acid can help to prevent the two main types of NTDs:

**Spina Bifida:** This is a disease that prevents a baby's spine from developing correctly. Part of the backbone does not close properly and leaves the spinal cord malformed. Babies born with spina bifida may suffer muscle weakness, paralysis, loss of sensation in the legs and weak bladder control. Around 30 per cent of these babies will have slight to severe mental retardation.

**Anencephaly:** This is a disease that prevents the proper development of the brain. A baby born with anencephaly has a severely underdeveloped brain and skull and usually dies at birth or shortly afterwards. This accounts for approximately half of all NTD cases.

### HOW CAN I INTRODUCE FOLIC ACID INTO MY DIET?

Eating a healthy diet including folate-rich foods in addition to taking supplements is the best way to ensure a healthy baby and pregnancy. Research has shown that taking a 0.4mg (400mcg) supplement at least one month before you become pregnant and during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy can reduce the risk of the baby developing NTDs by 70 per cent.

Folate is so important to take during these times that the Health Education Authority began a public awareness campaign in 1996. Folate is also vital for the proper formation of red blood cells and a deficiency can lead to anaemia during pregnancy. You can take either an individual supplement of 400mcg folic acid or if you feel your diet is lacking choose a prenatal supplement which has this along with other essential vitamins and minerals. In your daily diet try to include three to five servings of vegetables, two to four servings of fruit, and over six servings of enriched breads, cereals, and pastas. Vegetarians are at an advantage because their diet often includes fresh vegetables, fruits and grains – all top folate sources.

### SAFETY FIRST

While there are no known toxic effects of overdosing on folic acid, high levels (over 700mcg) taken for a prolonged time may interfere with the body's absorption of the mineral zinc and can mask a deficiency in vitamin B12. People with epilepsy should seek advice from their doctor first as it can hinder epileptic drugs.

### Further info

- National Health Information Service Helpline  
Contact 0800 665 544.
- Association for Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus  
Contact 01733 555988 or [www.asbah.org](http://www.asbah.org).

**T**o work out when your baby is due, take the first day of your last period and add nine months and seven days. This, however, is only a rough date and depends on the length of your cycle; it can be out by around two weeks.

An ultrasound scan can give you a more accurate estimated date of delivery (EDD). If you can tell your doctor or midwife when your last period was, she can arrange for your ultrasound to be done around 12 weeks from that date. The size and dimensions of your uterus and your baby will be measured.

● Only around five per cent of babies arrive on their due date – the rest arrive anywhere between 37 and 42 weeks. First babies tend to be late, and your second pregnancy is likely to be shorter than your first.

● Some babies need to be delivered before 40 weeks. This might be the case if you have any problems such as pre-eclampsia or diabetes; you'll be closely monitored until a decision is made.

● Babies born before 37 weeks may need special care, but most babies born between 37 and 40 weeks don't and can usually leave hospital with you.

● A full-term birth is 40 weeks. If your baby's born later than this she'll be considered post-term or a 'late' baby. Many hospitals have a policy of inducing when you're 10 days overdue. From this point onwards the placenta doesn't work as effectively, so your baby doesn't get all the nutrients she needs. Four out of five late babies are born within 10 days of their due date.

● Late babies tend to have quite dry, peeling skin because they've spent longer in the amniotic fluid without the protection of lanugo (soft hair) or vernix. Her skin may be opaque and scaly and her toe- and fingernails will also be quite long.

● The skullbones of a late baby are fused, so she'll have a smaller fontanelle (the soft spot at the top of the head). She'll also be very alert: often her eyes will look big and she will be very hungry.