



Feature Column

By Dr. Fay W. Boozman, Director

Keeping Your Hometown Healthy

Folic Acid: For All the Right Reasons

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Folic acid might be one vitamin that your diet is missing. It has benefits for people of all ages. This healthy vitamin may be exactly right for your reproductive health and your heart.

Have you read or heard how folic acid can prevent 50 to 70 percent of some birth defects? Both prospective Moms and Dads can improve the reproductive process by getting more folic acid in their daily diet and also by taking a daily multivitamin that includes folic acid. Less than a third of women of childbearing age take a daily multivitamin with folic acid. Improving the overall diet for the family can impact current and future generations. A lack of folic acid in the diet has recently been linked to cleft lip and palate, some childhood leukemias, some cancers, Down syndrome and even Alzheimer's disease.

But what about middle-aged and older Americans? According to researchers, this B vitamin could prevent up to 50,000 heart disease deaths a year among men and women. A team at the University of Washington School of Public Health found very strong evidence that folic acid can reduce heart disease risk caused by increased levels of Homocysteine.

Homocysteine is an amino acid that is normally present in the blood. Plasma Homocysteine

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levels are strongly influenced by your diet, as well as by genetic factors. The dietary components with the greatest effects on Homocysteine levels are folic acid and vitamins B6 and B12. These B vitamins help to break down Homocysteine in the body. Studies in Canada and Europe found that people with the lowest levels of blood folic acid had a higher risk of dying from a heart attack or stroke.

Both women and men need 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid every day. It is a target we can reach by choosing foods at the base of the Food Guide Pyramid – fruits, vegetables and enriched grain products.

Since January 1998, all enriched grain products in the United States have had folic acid added. Currently, over two dozen cereals have 100 percent of the adult recommended dietary allowance of folic acid per serving. Prior to adding folic acid to grain products, an estimated 88 percent of Americans did not get enough folic acid in their diet. The Framingham Heart Study has shown that this addition is associated with a big improvement in folic intake in middle-aged and older adults. Researchers at The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta report a 19 percent reduction in neural tube defects and a 23 percent reduction of spina bifida, one of the most common neural tube defects, since fortification was required.

Here are some ways to get more folic acid in your diet. When you are in the cereal aisle of your grocery store, be sure to check out the cereals with 100 percent folic acid. If these aren't to your liking, pick your favorite cereal and read the label. See if your cereal will give you 25 to 50 percent of your daily needs per serving. Measure a serving at home and you might be surprised to see that you are eating close to two servings. Drink some orange juice and add a banana or some strawberries to your cereal for a great start to your day.

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An important fact to remember is that all enriched grain products have folic acid. Have a sandwich made with pita bread; try some pasta or rice. Beans, peas and nuts are good natural sources of folic acid. Try peanut butter and crackers or just a handful of peanuts-both are great snacks.

You might have heard the “5 A Day” slogan over the past several years. Those five or more servings of fruits and vegetables a day are important to folic acid intake. Add some color to your meal (along with folic acid) by having some broccoli or sweet potatoes.

The American Heart Association recommends, “a healthy, balanced diet that includes five servings of fruits and vegetables a day.” Check out their web site at www.americanheart.org and then click on their healthy lifestyle section.

For more information on the Arkansas 5 A Day program, call 1-800-235-0002 or visit www.healthyarkansas.com and place “5 A Day” in the Search window.

For more information concerning folic acid, contact Marilou Brodie at (501) 661-2914.

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