

About Folate and Folate Deficiency

What does folate do?

Folate (folic acid, B9) is one of the B-complex vitamins. It is important for the brain, and for maintaining mental health. Folate is used to manufacture our DNA and RNA, so it is needed for making new cells – because of this it is very important for pregnancy, infancy, adolescence, and any time you need to grow new tissue (such as after an injury or surgery). Folate also works with B12 to make red blood cells, and plays a role in maintaining the health of the cardiovascular system, nervous system, and digestive system.

What happens if my folate is low/if I don't get enough folate?

If you do not have enough folate you may notice that you become fatigued easily and feel tired and weak. You may experience dizziness, heart palpitations (rapid heart beats), and feel short of breath. Other common symptoms are poor appetite, sore/swollen tongue, and diarrhea.

If folate deficiency is allowed to progress, complications can develop including severe nerve damage, memory loss, heart disease and possibly some forms of cancer. If you are a woman with folate deficiency and you become pregnant, you risk having a miscarriage or having a baby with serious birth defects. Folate deficiency is also associated with a form of anemia that causes large blood cells.

What are other symptoms?

- Memory loss/changes
- Gum disease, mouth sores
- Burning sensation around mouth
- Irritability and depression
- Psychosis
- Muscle weakness, difficulty walking
- Ankle swelling
- Changes in vision

Where can I get folate?

The major source of folate in the American diet is in fortified foods such as cereal, enriched bread, pasta and waffles. Natural sources of folate include oranges/orange juice, green vegetables, peanuts, peas, sprouts, liver and soybeans. Folate is also found in dietary supplements such as multivitamins, B-complex vitamins and alone in tablets or capsules. If you have a folate deficiency, your doctor will probably ask you to take supplemental folate and watch your dietary intake. Malabsorptive weight loss surgery patients have decreased absorption of folate and should take higher doses of supplementation.

Other important things

If you have had weight loss surgery, chances are that you are not eating many of the foods that are fortified with folate. For this reason it is very important that you have another source such as a multivitamin with folate in it. If you are a woman, it is recommended to have a healthy folate level for a full year before becoming pregnant. If you are considering pregnancy, you should discuss testing with your doctor. If you have a folate deficiency, it is important that you follow up with your doctor for lab tests and other recommended care.