Dear Alice,

What foods contain folic acid?

? The Bee

Answer

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Great question and the good news is that there are a number of tasty choices for foods rich in folic acid. But, for those who are unfamiliar with this nutrient, it?s good to take a closer look at why it?s wise to pay attention to it in your dietary intake.

To talk about folic acid, it?s good to take a step back. This is because folic acid is actually the synthetic type of vitamin B9 that is often found in fortified foods and dietary supplements. Folate is the naturally occurring form of B9, typically found in foods. In either case, B9 plays a number of critical roles in the body:

- Helps convert carbohydrates into glucose (or fuel for the body).
- Assists in the body?s ability to effectively use fat and protein.
- Is involved in DNA and RNA production, which controls cell function and tissue growth.
- Supports brain function and emotional health.
- Works with vitamin B12 to make red blood cells.
- Aids in the proper function of iron in the body.

Research also suggests that there are a number of additional health benefits from getting enough folate/folic acid. Those who get recommended amounts before conception and during the first trimester of pregnancy are at a significantly lower risk for infants with neural tube birth defects (which can result in conditions such as cleft palate or spina bifida). Though more research is needed, a few different studies have suggested that folic acid may reduce the risk of heart disease, slow the progression of age-related hearing loss, reduce the risk of age-related macular degeneration, improve depression (for those low in the nutrient), and protect against certain types of cancer.

Low levels of folate/folic acid are common, more so among those who have a history of alcoholism, inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) [2], and celiac disease [3]. A deficiency in this nutrient is associated with inhibited growth, tongue inflammation, gingivitis [4], mental
sluggishness, shortness of breath, loss of appetite, and diarrhea. So, how much is needed on a day-to-day basis? For adults, the daily recommendation is 400 micrograms (mcg) of folate or folic acid (those who are pregnant are advised to get a bit extra at 600 mcg a day). It’s recommended that most people get an adequate amount of this nutrient from the foods they eat. Foods rich in folate include:

- Dark green, leafy vegetables, such as mustard greens and spinach
- Whole grains
- Peanuts, beans, and peas
- Root vegetables, such as beets and turnips
- Oranges and orange juice
- Beef liver (though it’s high in cholesterol as well, so moderation is key)

Folic acid is often added to processed foods, such as pre-packaged breads, cereals, and pastas? just take a gander at the nutrition facts label on the package to confirm the amount.

Making sure to get enough folate/folic acid is wise, but it is also possible to have too much. Generally speaking, if there’s a concern that folate/folic acid intake is low, it’s recommended that the decision to take folic acid supplements be done under the supervision of a health care provider. Though rare, side effects associated with too much folic acid include stomach issues, nausea, difficulty sleeping, loss of appetite, confusion, and possibly seizures. Folic acid supplements may also interact with certain medications. Relatedly, some medications used over a long period of time, such as antacids and other acid reducers, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), anti-seizure drugs, and some antibiotics, may lower levels of folic acid in the body.

You’re smart to ask the question of what foods may help you get necessary nutrients. Hopefully, with this information, you’re poised to curate a tasty, folic acid-rich plate. If you’re ready for a second helping of knowledge though, you might continue to ask questions and let your curiosity be your guide. For general information on dietary intake, take a look at the Optimal Nutrition [5] category in the Go Ask Alice! Nutrition and Physical Activity [6] archives. You might also learn about what your body needs specifically? everyone is a bit different. To that end, you may consider speaking with a health care provider or setting up an appointment with a registered dietitian to further inform your individual nutritional needs.

Alice!
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