



**Brainwave The Irish Epilepsy Association**  
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## FOLIC ACID

### **I have been diagnosed with epilepsy and my doctor has asked me to take folic acid can you explain why?**

If you are a woman of childbearing potential and have been diagnosed with epilepsy, it is important to be made aware of the benefits of taking folic acid. By taking the higher dose tablet of folic acid (**5mg as prescribed by your doctor; it cannot be acquired over the counter**) prior to conception you are reducing the risks of neural tube defects such as spina bifida.

### **What is folic acid?**

Folic acid is a vitamin belonging to the vitamin B group. The body cannot produce it; therefore, it needs to be taken with food or as a daily tablet. Women do not get enough folic acid from their diet alone and it is recommended that they increase their intake of folic acid by taking daily folic acid tablets.

### **Why is extra folic acid required for women with epilepsy?**

The reason for the recommended increased dose of folic acid 5mg is that certain anti-epileptic medications use up more folic acid already in the body at a faster rate, leaving reduced amounts of the vitamin in your body, which is essential in the early development of a baby's spinal cord.

### **When should folic acid be taken?**

Ideally, it is advised that you start taking folic acid once you have entered the teenage years or at least 3 months prior to conception.

### **What if I am already pregnant, have epilepsy and taking anti-epileptic drugs?**

If you find that you are already pregnant and on anti-epileptic drugs, **do not stop taking your anti-epileptic drugs** unless advised by your doctor. Start taking folic acid 5mg as soon as possible and continue until your first check up with your maternity hospital/GP/Neurologist. It is important to then contact the Irish Pregnancy & Epilepsy Register.

**The Republic of Ireland Pregnancy Register** was launched in May 2001. The aims of the service were to:

1. Establish the relative safety of anti-epileptic drugs with reference to major malformations in the offspring of women with epilepsy.
2. To establish whether seizure frequency is related to adverse outcome in pregnancy.
3. To monitor the rate of pre-conceptual folic acid administration in women with epilepsy and whether this beneficially affects outcome.
4. To educate individuals about epilepsy and pregnancy, by giving preconception, pregnancy and post pregnancy advice.

If you have any further queries please do not hesitate to contact the Community Epilepsy Specialist Nurse, Brainwave advice line on 01 4557500 or the Epilepsy & Pregnancy Register Nurse at free phone 1800 320 820.