Folic acid is used to make the extra blood your body needs during pregnancy. All women of childbearing age should consume 400 micrograms of folic acid per day.

**When should I start taking folic acid?**
You should start taking folic acid prior to getting pregnant, even if you are not trying to conceive. Neural tube defects usually develop in the first 28 days of pregnancy, often before a woman even knows she is pregnant. If you find you are pregnant and have not been taking folic acid, you should start now to help prevent any neural defects in the first three months of pregnancy.

**What foods contain folic acid?**
Approximately half of all pregnancies are unplanned. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has taken steps to fortify certain foods so all women of childbearing age get a daily dose of folic acid. The following foods can help you obtain your recommended amount of folic acid:
- Leafy green vegetables, such as a large spinach salad
- Citrus fruits, such as orange juice
- Beans
- Breads
- Cereals
- Rice
- Pastas

A daily vitamin with folic acid may be suggested by your health care provider.

**What are the risks of not taking folic acid?**
The absence of folic acid increases the possibility of a neural tube defect, a defect in the development of the spinal cord.
- Spina bifida is a condition in which the spinal cord is exposed. If the vertebrae (bones of the spinal column) surrounding the spinal cord do not close properly during the first 28 days after fertilization, the cord or spinal fluid bulge through, usually in the lower back.
- Anencephaly is the severe underdevelopment of the brain.

**How do I know if I am at risk for having a baby with neural tube defects, and how can I prevent this from happening?**
Women who are at greatest risk are those who have had a previous pregnancy which involved a neural defect. Women who are not eating a balanced diet that includes folic acid are also at risk.

The best way to prevent neural defects is to take the recommended 400 micrograms of folic acid daily for one month before conception, and during the first three months of pregnancy. Multivitamins which include folic acid should only be used as a supplement under the care of your health care provider.
How are neural tube defects diagnosed?
Neural tube defects are detected through an alpha-fetoprotein test (AFP); AFP is a blood test administered at 16-18 weeks gestation. The test measures alpha-fetoprotein, a substance produced by the fetus and secreted into the amniotic fluid, which is also in the mother’s blood. The level of AFP in mother’s blood peaks at about 30-32 weeks. Abnormally high amounts of AFP may indicate that a baby has a neural tube defect.

Other reasons for an elevated AFP?
An elevated AFP could mean the mother is carrying twins, or there is a problem with the placenta. Women with diabetes or liver disease may also have an elevated AFP level. However, an elevated AFP can mean that there are birth defects present such as severe kidney disease, liver disease, esophageal or intestinal blockage, Down Syndrome, urinary obstruction or osteogenesis imperfecta (fragility of the baby’s bones).

If I have an elevated AFP, what additional tests are available?
- A second AFP test
- An ultrasound
- Amniocentesis