

KNOW YOUR Nutrients

Knowing about the many types of nutrients could easily be a full-time job unto itself. But if you don't have the time, and simply want to know about what distinguishes one form of a vitamin, mineral, botanical, or other ingredient from another, you've come to the right place.

Folate *versus* Folic Acid: What's the Difference?

Folate is a member of the B vitamin family (B9), and can be found in asparagus, beans, broccoli, fresh fruit, peanuts, seafood, spinach, and sunflower seeds, just to name a few. Folate is something we can't do without, but our bodies can't synthesize it. This means we must get our folate through diet or supplementation.

Most people have probably heard about folic acid—the synthetic form of folate commonly found in many supplements and fortified foods. It's especially crucial in preventing neural tube defects in babies during pregnancy. But there is a better supplemental form of folate that is well worth seeking out.

That's because although folic acid is readily absorbed in the intestines, it is not biologically active. It doesn't have an active coenzyme component, so it must be converted by the body into a usable form. That useable form is called methylfolate, and it is available as a supplement too.

But how important is this nutrient really? Consider this: A deficiency in folate can put you at risk of cardiovascular disease, depression, and cognitive decline.

Fortunately, methylfolate supplementation has proven its value in a variety of studies. Clinical work has found that treatment with methylfolate can help reduce the severity of depression, whether used alone or as an adjunct treatment with medication. Additionally, it can reverse aspects of cognitive decline in those who have deficiencies of folate in their diets.

Working alongside vitamins B6 and B12, methylfolate also reduces levels of homocysteine, an inflammatory protein that is associated with high blood pressure and peripheral retinopathy. It is of great interest to those who work with heart patients or individuals with diabetes.

As mentioned, a major advantage methylfolate has over folic acid is that it can be more readily utilized in the body. This is helpful especially for those with a genetic predisposition, an altered gastrointestinal pH level that affects absorption, or any other metabolic challenges that would otherwise thwart the body's use of folic acid.

That's not to say that folic acid is bad. Aside from preventing neural tube defects, it has shown great promise in reducing the side effects of methotrexate, a drug used for treating severe rheumatoid arthritis symptoms, and in repairing peripheral nerve damage. But if you are looking for a form that won't mask vitamin B12 deficiencies (another issue with folic acid) or be hampered by a potentially cumbersome conversion process in the body that whittles down its effectiveness, methylfolate may be best for you. ■