

## Folate and Reducing Cancer Risk



**Folate is a water soluble B-vitamin found naturally in foods, such as wholemeal bread, legumes, and green leafy vegetables such as broccoli, lettuce and cabbage, and liver. Our bodies need folate to be healthy.**

### **The decisions on adding folate (folic acid) to bread**

The Australian Government told breadmaking companies that they must add folic acid to wheat flour in September 2009 to reduce the number of babies being born with neural tube defects. The New Zealand Government has delayed its decision on whether to do the same until 2012. New Zealand bread makers have been given the option to add folic acid to bread since September 2009. Adding folic acid to certain foods has been permitted in New Zealand and Australia since January 1996.

### **The evidence on folate**

There is probable evidence that foods containing folate reduces the risk of pancreatic cancer. In other words, researchers are fairly sure eating folate reduces the risk of getting pancreatic cancer. Researchers have noticed a small amount of evidence that suggests folate may reduce the risk of getting oesophageal cancer and bowel cancer. Other studies suggest that eating a lot of folate in your diet may reduce the risk of post-menopausal breast cancer, particularly for women with a family history of breast cancer.

There does not appear to be any strong link between eating folate and the risk of lung cancer. There is; however, a small amount of evidence to suggest a link between eating folate and ovarian, stomach and prostate cancer.

A small number of recent studies suggest that high doses of folic acid as a supplement may promote the growth of undiagnosed premalignant (the stage before they become cancerous) and malignant (cancerous) lesions of the bowel. While dietary folate (even from foods fortified with folic acid) may have no bad effects, some studies suggest taking both a folic supplement and eating food with folic acid in it could encourage adenomas, already in the body, to grow.

Based on current evidence, the benefits of adding folic acid to food (thereby reducing the chances of NZ babies being born with neural tube defects) outweighs any risks of folate increasing risk of cancer. Therefore, the Cancer Society of New Zealand and Cancer Council Australia are not against their Governments telling food companies to add folic acid to the food they make. However, careful monitoring of new evidence on any bad effects caused by adding folic acid to food, particularly whether it affects the numbers being diagnosed with cancer, is needed.

### **Cancer Society recommendations**

The Cancer Society of New Zealand and Cancer Council Australia support their Governments' guidelines for food and nutrition (New Zealand Food and Nutrition Guidelines and Australian Dietary Guidelines). We recommend people get what they need to be healthy by eating whole foods, such as fruits, vegetables, breads and cereals rather than supplements, such as mineral and vitamin pills.

Because there is conflicting/uncertain advice around risk, it is recommended that people with diagnosed bowel adenomas and those with an increased risk of developing bowel adenomas should avoid taking nutritional supplements that contain high dose (greater than 1mg (1000µg) per day) folic acid.