

Folate & its role in reproductive health

Getting enough folate on a daily basis will help prepare for a healthy pregnancy

Folate, or folic acid, is a B vitamin that plays an important role in reproductive health. It is important during the first four weeks of pregnancy, a time when many women do not know they are pregnant. The vitamin is essential for several reasons:

- ◆ It helps the normal development of an unborn baby's spine, brain and skull.
- ◆ It supports a pregnant woman's expanding blood volume and growing maternal and fetal tissues.
- ◆ It can reduce the risk of a baby being born with a neural tube defect.



What is a neural tube defect?

Neural tube defects (NTDs) are birth defects that occur very early in pregnancy when the neural tube forms in a developing baby. This tube will eventually become the spinal cord, spine, brain and skull. When the neural tube fails to develop properly, the results is a defect that affects the brain (anencephaly) and/or spinal cord (spina bifida). Folate is essential to the healthy formation of the neural tube.

Getting adequate folate

Eating a varied diet based on Canada's Food Guide will help pregnant women get enough folate to meet their own nutritional needs. However, it is difficult to get enough folate from food alone. As a result, Health Canada recommends taking a daily multivitamin that has 400 micrograms (0.4 mg) of folic acid at least three months before becoming pregnant and throughout pregnancy. Women

should make sure their multivitamin contains no more than 1,000 micrograms (1 mg) of folic acid unless a physician recommends otherwise.

If a woman has had a NTD in a previous pregnancy, or if there is a family history of this defect, a higher dose of folic acid may be required. Diabetes, obesity or epilepsy are other indicators that a higher dose of folic acid may be needed. Seeking the advice of a physician is recommended.

Supplements and food sources

Some women in their reproductive years may find it's difficult to get enough folate. Following a healthy diet and taking a vitamin supplement may be too costly for some people. If you're concerned about getting enough folate, you can call Your Health Connection for help about local nutrition programs and services for pregnant women.

In the future

Folate plays an important role in the health of our future children. Promoting folate-rich foods and folic acid supplementation will help all women of childbearing age, as will the provision of practical support for women who find it difficult to get the folate they need.

To Optimize Dietary Folate Intake:

- ◆ Follow Canada's Food Guide.
- ◆ Include grain products fortified with folic acid each day, such as enriched bread or pasta.
- ◆ Have legumes, such as beans or lentils, often.
- ◆ Eat at least one dark green vegetable each day.
- ◆ See a registered dietitian if food intake is significantly restricted. This can happen when women exclude an entire food group or have severe nausea or vomiting.
- ◆ If you have trouble finding a local dietitian, try Eat Right Ontario's no-charge "Ask a Dietitian" service online at www.eatrightontario.ca.



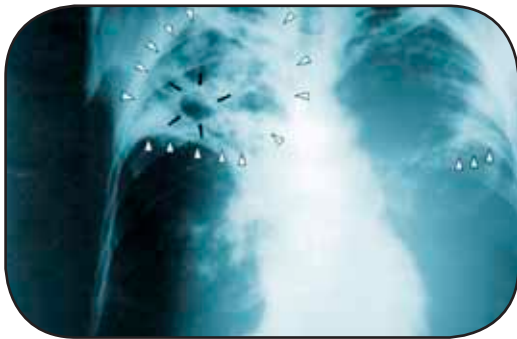


Health MATTERS

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Tuberculosis still a reality

Tuberculosis (TB) may be little heard about, but the disease is far from gone. In fact, TB remains a health issue of concern, even in Canada where the risk of developing TB is quite low.



Tuberculosis is one of the most common and deadly infectious diseases in the world today. There are nine million new cases of TB every year, mostly in developing countries. In Canada there are approximately 1,600 new cases of active TB reported each year. It has become an issue in Toronto, where 350 to 400 cases arise annually.

Locally, the risk of contracting TB is lower than national and provincial averages. Occasionally during the year, the health unit is called to investigate an active case of TB. When this happens, health unit specialists will interview close family members and close friends, fellow students or business colleagues. Some people could be required to take a skin test.

The TB skin test

A TB skin test shows whether or not a person has ever been infected with the TB bacteria. If the test is positive, the doctor will follow up with a chest X-ray. Additional tests such as a test of phlegm from coughing will find out if the disease is active.

TB skin tests are also sometimes done as a condition of employment or schooling, or for health reasons.

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A positive skin test does not necessarily mean that a person is sick with TB. A kind of TB called latent or non-contagious TB makes up 90 per cent of the people with tuberculosis. These people will never become sick with TB, are not contagious and cannot pass the bacteria to someone else.

Preventive treatment

If a case arises in your community, it's important to know that TB is not very contagious.

- ◆ It spreads in the air from coughs and sneezes from a person who is actively ill with TB.
- ◆ It takes long and close contact with a sick person, such as in a home setting or student residence, to pick up the bacteria.
- ◆ A case in the neighbourhood or the same building is not a high risk for you or your family.

For the 10 per cent of those with latent TB who may develop active, infectious disease, treatment is available and is effective. If you have latent TB, your doctor may suggest taking an antibiotic as a preventive measure. This antibiotic will kill the latent TB bacteria in the body, eliminating the 10 per cent risk of developing active and contagious TB.

Treatment for active TB usually runs for six to nine months, and is free in Ontario. Drug treatment begins as soon as TB is diagnosed. A patient with tuberculosis must take their medication consistently to avoid developing a drug-resistant strain of the bacteria in their bodies. After about three weeks of taking the medication, the patient will usually no longer be infectious to others and after treatment is completed, is cured of the disease.



More help to keep your kids' smiles healthy



Early childhood tooth decay is an increasingly serious issue in Simcoe Muskoka. In fact, oral health in local children is worse than in most other parts of Ontario.

The health impacts of poor oral health for children can be especially serious. Early childhood caries, or cavities, is a rapid and extensive form of dental decay. Children with early childhood caries usually need treatment under a general anaesthetic in hospital – and waiting lists for treatment can be as long as a year.

Lifelong impact

Children who lose teeth at an early age because of tooth decay can be forced to limit their food choices. They may have impaired speech development and tend to have more dental diseases for the rest of their lives.

Dental health is important to overall health. Children need to get a healthy start with regular trips to the dentist or dental hygienist to help to prevent dental problems that can contribute to diseases later in life.

Free coverage

A new no-cost dental program for children of low-income families – Healthy Smiles Ontario – is now offering dental checkups for children to the age of 17 in families that qualify. The program covers regular visits to a licensed dental care provider such as a dentist or dental hygienist to establish and maintain good oral health. It covers a full range of dental services including checkups, cleaning, fillings, X-rays, scaling and more.

It does not cover cosmetic dentistry (such as teeth whitening) or orthodontics (such as braces).

Healthy Smiles Ontario will be delivered in three ways in Simcoe Muskoka.

- ◆ Children can access the program now by visiting a participating dentist or dental hygienist.
- ◆ They can visit the dental clinic in Barrie that is expanding to offer full care (the clinic is expected to be open by the end of January 2011).
- ◆ They can visit the mobile clinic, a traveling dentists' office, whenever the clinic is in their community. The mobile clinic will be running in the spring.

For both clinics there will be seven full-time staff, including two dentists, to care for eligible children.

To find out if your family qualifies for Healthy Smiles Ontario, call 1-866-532-3161 or visit www.ontario.ca/healthysmiles or www.simcoemuskokahealth.org.

Healthy smiles Ontario



Radon—the hidden hazard

Invisible and odorless, this gas can find its way into homes and buildings

In the 1980s, medical evidence emerged showing radon could be a health problem in homes. In the last three to five years new, more protective guidelines were set for radon in homes. Health Canada says radon in homes causes an estimated 10 per cent of lung cancers and is second only to smoking as the leading cause of lung cancer in Canada.

So, what do homeowners need to know about radon?

A billion-year-old reality

Radon, it turns out, has always been there. It is an odourless, colourless radioactive gas that's naturally present in our environment. Radioactive minerals like radium and uranium decay, and as they do they produce radon. Radon gas can enter homes through any opening that contacts the soil, such as cracks in foundation walls.

In the outdoor environment, radon disperses in the air. However, in an enclosed space such as a basement, radon levels can build up to levels high enough to pose a potential health risk for the residents of the home.

It is a bigger problem in areas with Canadian Shield granite formations – not uncommon in Simcoe Muskoka. Residential homes located within these areas may be at a greater risk of elevated radon levels. Radon levels vary widely from location to location. There is no way to predict which home will have higher radon levels. Any home, regardless of age, location or construction style, may have a radon problem.

What is the health concern?

When we breathe air contaminated with radon gas, radioactive particles in the radon gas damage the tissue in our lungs. This damage can lead to the development of lung cancer.

Individuals who spend greater amounts of time in the home, such as the elderly, young mothers and preschool aged children, are at greater risk from radon exposure. Some studies show children may

be particularly vulnerable to radon exposure, increasing their risk of certain cancers. The risk is significantly higher for smokers who are also exposed to radon.

Recently, Health Canada substantially lowered the maximum level recommended for radon gas in residential homes. This has led to changes to the National Building Code that are meant to reduce the chance of radon getting above those recommended levels in homes and other buildings. Ontario's building code could change to include those new regulations after public consultations take place early next year.



What can I do?

The first step to protect yourself and your family is to test your home for radon. If you want to do it yourself, simple radon test kits can be purchased from retailers that sell building, hardware or health care products. Alternatively, you can consult the yellow pages to find a contractor who provides testing services.

If the radon levels in your home are found to exceed the guidelines, there are ways to fix the problem, depending on the characteristics of your home and the radon levels present. The fix can be as simple as increasing ventilation in your basement. For more complex treatments, you may need to hire a trained contractor.

Where can I get more information?

For more information on radon or other health concerns call Your Health Connection weekdays at 705-721-7520 or 1-877-721-7520 from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. or visit our website at www.simcoemuskokahealth.org.

