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1 - OCT 2004

Folic acid in flour would cut birth defects – report

by **Lyndsay Moss**

ROUTINELY adding folic acid to foods like flour and pasta would significantly reduce the number of babies born with birth defects such as spina bifida, research showed today.

In the UK the Food Standards Agency advises women planning to have a baby to take a daily supplement of 400 micrograms of folic acid to help prevent neural tube defects.

While some breakfast cereals and bread products are fortified with folic acid, the Government decided not to introduce the mandatory fortification of flour after advice from the FSA.

It followed concerns that increasing folic acid in the diet could make it harder to spot deficiency of vitamin B12, which can lead to neurological damage, especially in older people.

Despite this, more than 30 countries have already introduced mandatory fortification of food products, leading to a falling number of babies being born with defects.

The latest study, published in BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth, focused on the Canadian

province of Newfoundland and Labrador after the government ordered that folic acid be added to flour, cornmeal and pasta in 1998. The researchers, led by Dr Catherine McCourt from Health Canada, found that the proportion of babies born with neural tube defects dropped by 78% after the legislation was introduced.

The province historically had one of the highest rates of neural tube defects in North America. Between 1991 and 1997 there were 4.36 defects per 1,000 births, dropping to 0.96 per 1,000 births after fortification between 1998 and 2001.

The researchers also looked at the impact of fortification on over-65s and concluded that there was no evidence of adverse effects on this group. They said: "Specifically, there is no evidence to suggest an adverse effect of folic acid fortification on detection of abnormalities in vitamin B12 status." They said, as a result of their findings, that Canada's food fortification strategy should continue.

Andrew Russell, chief executive of the Association for Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus

(ASBAH), said they had been campaigning for the fortification of flour with folic acid in the UK for more than a decade.

He accused the Government of "sitting on their hands" by not addressing the issue and said he hoped the new study would add to the evidence already showing the benefits of folic acid.

"They have raised the possibility that folic acid could make it difficult to spot vitamin B12 deficiency, but there is no evidence of that happening in this country for decades.

"This is in our view an excuse. They don't want to do a population measure because too many consumers don't want more things put in their food," Mr Russell said.

He said that folic acid fortification was not a priority for ministers, who were more interested in tackling obesity and public smoking bans which were more high profile.

Good natural sources of folic acid include green leafy vegetables, peas, yeast extract, brown rice, oranges and bananas.