

Fortified with folic

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ADDING folic acid to flour and bread has dramatically cut the number of babies born with brain and spinal defects in the U.S.

The reduction of more than a quarter will reinforce calls from British campaigners to fortify foods here.

Folic acid is a form of vitamin B, which is critical for brain development in the womb, and it is estimated that fortifying food with it could prevent 750 abortions a year carried out in the UK when defects are picked up early in pregnancy.

U.S. health authorities said yesterday that severe brain and

Ingredient cuts defects in children

spinal birth defects have dropped 27 per cent since 1998 when the government began requiring makers of cereal, pasta, bread and flour to add folic acid.

Before fortification, about 4,130 babies had such defects each year and nearly 1,200 died.

After fortification, the yearly average dropped to about 3,000, with 840 deaths, the Centers for

Disease Control and Prevention reported.

In the UK, women hoping to become pregnant are already advised to take a 400 microgram supplement of folic acid daily, and for the first 12 weeks of pregnancy.

The vitamin is also found in green, leafy vegetables.

In 2000, Government experts recommended that folic acid should be added to flour but the suggestion was rejected by the Food Standards Agency (FSA), which said extra folic acid could mask anaemia in the elderly.

Andrew Russell, executive director of the Association for Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus, said: 'The evidence is mounting that fortification has enormous benefits.'

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