

Bread may have folic acid added to cut birth defects

By Sally Pook

FOLIC acid may be added to bread and flour to reduce the number of babies with birth defects if advice from experts at the Government's food watchdog is taken up.

A three-month consultation involving consumers, industry representatives and health groups will be launched today. That could lead to ministers approving the move, which would be the first time since 1946 that manufacturers have been ordered to add vitamins to food.

Many women do not follow Government advice to take folic acid when they are planning to conceive and are pregnant, partly because half of all pregnancies are unplanned.

Folic acid is one of the Vitamin B family, B9. It is found in beans, leafy green vegetables and citrus fruits, among others. It can help prevent a birth condition known as neural tube defect that results from failure of the spinal cord or brain to develop normally. Between 700 and 900 pregnancies a year are affected.

Countries which compulsorily add folic acid to flour, including America, Canada and Chile, have noted a 30 to 50 per cent drop in the number of birth defects.

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) estimates that if flour were fortified with folic acid at levels of between 100 and 450 microgrammes per 100

grammes, the number of pregnancies affected by neural tube defect would fall by between 40 and 370 a year.

Initial discussions with the bread and milling industry have already taken place and indicate that their preferred option would be to add folic acid to all flour except wholemeal at the milling stage.

The FSA estimates the cost to the industry would be about £700,000 a year.

"Nothing has been decided," an FSA spokesman said. "Our board will decide whether to consult on this and, if they do, this will last three months. Then we will make a decision on recommendations to ministers. Ultimately they do not have to accept our advice."

The FSA accepts that there would be ethical concerns about "compulsory or mass medication".

The Federation of Bakers said it would "fully support" a Government decision to fortify flour with the vitamin.

The Association for Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus said the proposal could prevent hundreds of abortions being performed.

"We know that 90 per cent of the pregnancies affected by neural tube defects are terminated," said Peter Farrall, spokesman. "That is a huge cost, both in terms of cost to the NHS and trauma to families and mothers. The benefits will be that over 300 pregnancies in the UK will be saved."