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# Bread vitamin to prevent birth defects

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**BREAD** will be fortified with the B vitamin folic acid later this year in a bid to drastically reduce the numbers of babies born with spina bifida and other defects, it has emerged.

Health Minister, Mary Harney yesterday launched a public consultation to seek views on whether the vitamin be added on a mandatory or voluntary basis in order to cut the numbers affected by the neural tube defects by

more than 70pc.

The current approach – of health campaigns to raise awareness among women of child-bearing age that they should take the

vitamin in case they become pregnant – is clearly not working as research shows only one-in-five is taking the folic acid supplement and over one-third are not taking any at all.

Experts believe fortification is the best and cheapest way for women to get the required amount.

Ireland has a particularly high incidence of neural tube defects, affecting 1 – 1.5 per 1,000 babies born here. Of the 61,000 births here last year 67 had a neural tube defect.

The other option – which experts believe is the best approach – would involve mandatory fortification of bread-making flour.

The Department is to work with the Food Safety Authority and a National Committee on Food Fortification with Folic Acid which will oversee the initiative.

Since flour was fortified with the vitamin in the USA and Canada in 1996 the number of neural tube defects has drastically reduced including by as much as 78pc in Newfoundland.

Half of all births here are unplanned and this reduces the likelihood of many women at risk of having a baby with a defect taking the supplement.

Even in cases of planned pregnancy research in the Coombe Women's Hospital in Dublin has shown that only 21pc of women are taking the folic acid within the correct timeframe.