



Folic acid in flour could help babies

Researchers report marked fall in number of birth defects

by PA REPORTER

ROUTINELY adding folic acid to foods such as 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 found that the proportion of babies born with neural tube defects dropped by 78 per cent after the

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.

Andrew Russell, chief executive of the Association for Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus (ASBAH), said the organisation 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."

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

While only about 100 babies are born in the UK each year with neural tube defects, up to 1,000 are estimated to be terminated before birth when the problem is detected, Mr Russell said.

"That is not a good prevention policy," he added.

The FSA recommends women take 400 micrograms of folic acid from the time

RECEIVED
1 - OCT 2004

Folic acid in flour could help babies

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