

## National

# Flour additive to cut birth defects urged

**Agency wants compulsory addition to white bread**

**Extra folic acid would aid pregnant women**

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The Food Standards Agency will propose the mandatory fortification of white flour with folic acid, a synthetic form of folate, at its board meeting tomorrow. It is expected to sanction a 12-week consultation with consumers before reaching a final decision on whether to add the vitamin to food to reduce cases of birth defects in the UK.

Folate plays a vital role in cell division and supplements of folic acid have been shown to lower the risk of women having babies with neural tube defects such as spina bifida. Between 700 and 900 pregnancies in the UK a year are thought to be affected by these defects. The current advice is for women who are hoping to become pregnant to take supplements of the vitamin before conception. However, about 50% of pregnancies are thought to be unplanned.

Wholemeal bread is naturally rich in folate but refining whole wheat to white flour removes the folic acid and many other nutrients. The FSA proposal would exclude wholemeal flour from compulsory fortification.

Other rich sources include green leafy vegetables and seeds, but consumption of these tends to be low, particularly among lower income groups, where spina bifida incidence is higher.

If adopted, the proposal would introduce the first mandatory fortification of food in the UK since immediately after the

second world war, when the addition of calcium, iron, and vitamins B1 and B3 to flour was made compulsory.

In 2002, the FSA rejected expert advice on adding folic acid to flour because it was concerned that the fortification could mask vitamin B12 deficiency in elderly people and because it was concerned about imposing mass medication. Its scientific advisers now say that other countries which have gone ahead with the fortification have seen a decrease in birth defects.

"Only a very small number of people are at risk of folic acid masking vitamin B12 deficiency and those at risk tend to be known already," said Annie Anderson, professor of food choice at the University of Dundee and a government adviser on nutrition. "We cannot identify who is likely to have a first baby with neural tube defects, so the theory is that we should reach all women of child-bearing age with folic acid." Folate is also believed to regulate levels of homocysteine in the blood, a risk factor for heart disease.

The food industry estimates the cost will be £700,000 a year, but the Federation of Bakers said it would support a government decision to fortify flour with folic acid. Some manufacturers already fortify bread products with folic acid voluntarily, as do some cereal manufacturers.

Gordon Polson, director of the federation, said: "Any decision to mass medicate the population must be made by government, not by industry, and only then after the fullest possible consultation."

Tim Lang, professor of food policy at City University in London, said he expected fortification to rise in the next decade to tackle growing dietary deficiencies. While not opposed to the move, he said it was an indictment of the nutritional status of the population and the food supply system.

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