**Call to make folic acid mandatory for mothers-to-be because urging women to take supplement voluntarily is failing to drive down brain and spine defects**

* **Experts say birth defects of the brain, spine or spinal cord are still too high**
* **Government advisers say folic acid recommendations have not been taken**
* **Women are urged to take 400mcg of folic acid daily**
* **Folic acid prevents neural tube defects which include spina bifida**

By [DAILY MAIL REPORTER](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/search.html?s=&authornamef=Daily+Mail+Reporter)

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Urging women to take folic acid in pregnancy is failing to drive down rates of spina bifida, while the number of abortions for such defects is rising, experts have said.

Rates of neural tube defects - birth defects of the brain, spine or spinal cord - are still too high and countries should consider adding folic acid to bread and flour, researchers said.

Earlier this month, UK Government advisers wrote to ministers expressing their concern that recommendations made in 2000, 2006 and 2009 to improve levels of folic acid intake had still not been taken on board.

They pointed to a rising number of abortions in England and Wales for neural tube defects, with 420 in 2013, up from 390 in 2012, 364 in 2011, 338 in 2010 and 299 in 2009.

The letter, from the [**Scientific Advisory Committee**](https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/scientific-advisory-committee-on-nutrition) on Nutrition (SACN), said the number of births affected by neural tube defects remained too high.

Women are urged to take 400mcg of folic acid daily whilst trying to conceive and for the first three months of pregnancy to cut the chance of neural tube defects, which include spina bifida and anencephaly.

In the US, fortifying flour with folic acid has led to a reduction in neural tube defects.

In research published in the British Medical Journal ([**BMJ)**](http://www.bmj.com/), experts said voluntary measures were failing.

The study found no clear evidence of a downward trend in neural tube defects over a 20-year period across Europe.

Experts analysed data for more than 11,000 cases of neural tube defects from 28 EUROCAT (European Surveillance of Congenital Anomalies) registries covering 12.5 million births in 19 countries between 1991 and 2011.

They found the overall total prevalence of neural tube defects in 2011 was similar to that in 1991.

Figures in the paper show that in the East Midlands and South Yorkshire, between 1996 and 2011, there were 1,012 births affected by neural tube defects, at a rate of 10.97 per 10,000 births.

In northern England, between 2000 and 2011, there were 522 neural tube defects - a rate of 13.63

In the Thames Valley, between 1991 and 2011, there were 337 cases, giving a rate of 11.55.

In Wales, between 1998 and 2011, 703 births were affected - a rate of 15.08.

The researchers, including from the University of Oxford, said: 'Neural tube defects represent one of the most prevalent groups of birth defects with serious consequences for newborns and their families.

'Although termination of pregnancy for foetal anomaly has considerably reduced the live birth prevalence of these anomalies, it is certainly not an optimal solution for a birth defect that is highly preventable with a readily available and low-cost measure, as is the case for neural tube defects with folic acid supplementation or food fortification.'

They said mandatory fortification of food with folic acid should be considered.

A study from experts at [**Queen Mary University**](http://www.qmul.ac.uk/) of London last year found that fewer than one in three women in the UK take folic acid supplements before pregnancy.

The research, published in the PLOS ONE journal, questioned almost half a million women attending antenatal screening between 1999 and 2012 in England and the Isle of Man.

The proportion of women taking folic acid supplements decreased from 35% in 1999-2001 to 31% in 2011-2012.