**Call to add folic acid to bread in Europe to save babies’ lives**

Is it time for some fortification? Folic acid should be added to bread and flour to prevent hundreds of babies being aborted or born with diseases like spina bifida, say health experts.

If women take folic acid supplements before conception and in the early stages of pregnancy, it can reduce their babies’ risk of developing a neural tube defect, which can severely disrupt the development of the brain and spine, leading to disorders such as spina bifida. Although woman have been urged to take folic acid supplements for decades, the number of neural tube defects has not fallen in Europe.

The World Health Organization recommends that pregnant women take [a 0.4mg supplement of folic acid daily](http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/77770/1/9789241501996_eng.pdf?ua=1).

But voluntary measures are failing. Babak Khoshnood of INSERM, the French national health research institute, and his colleagues have analysed the rate of neural tube defects recorded in 28 registries across 19 European countries, and have found no change between 1991 – when folic acid guidelines were introduced – and 2011. The study is published in the *BMJ*.

Although the number of infants born with neural tube defects has declined, the team believe this is due to an increase in the number of terminations of babies with the disorder – a result of earlier diagnosis.

According to a 2009 report on Europe, only a “small minority” of women take folic acid for the full advised period. “The main problem is that you are meant to take folic acid a month before and during the first two to three weeks of pregnancy,” says Khoshnood. “By the time most women find out they are pregnant, it’s too late.”

There are other issues, says [Jim Mills](https://www.nichd.nih.gov/about/staff/Pages/bio.aspx?nih_id=0010056052) of the US National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, who is an author of an accompanying article calling for mandatory folic acid fortification of food. The US Public Health Service recommends that all women of child-bearing age ensure they supplement their diets with plenty of folic acid, but it is a tall order to expect someone to take a supplement daily for 30 or so years, he says. The cost of taking supplements can also be prohibitive for some, he adds.

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## Force feed

In the US, various foods, such as some breakfast cereals, bread and pasta, have been fortified with folic acid on a mandatory basis since 1998. The programme is thought to have added between 0.1 and 0.2mg to the daily folic acid intake of women in the US and [studies suggest](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3257747/) that it is responsible for a 19 to 32 per cent decrease in the rate of neural tube defects since it was introduced.

About 80 other countries have implemented similar fortification strategies, including Canada, Costa Rica, Chile and South Africa.

European countries may have held back over concerns that folic acid supplementation may have risks. High doses of folic acid can make it difficult to spot deficiencies in vitamin B12, which can lead to anaemia and even brain damage.

Some have raised concerns about higher levels of folic acid and cancer. The evidence of the effects of folic acid on cancer is mixed – while some studies suggest a protective effect, [others have hinted at potential risks](http://www.efsa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/scientific_output/files/main_documents/3e.pdf). However, no harmful effects have been observed since folic acid fortification was enforced in the US in 1998, says Mills. It is time for European countries to follow suit, he says.

Khoshnood agrees. “These are anomalies we can do something about, so let’s do it,” he says.

Journal references: *BMJ*, [DOI: 10.1136/bmj.h5949](http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.h5949) (Khoshnood *et al*.); [DOI: 10.1136/bmj.h6198](http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.h6198) (Mills *et al*.)