A new study has shown that around 2,000 cases of serious birth defects, such as spina bifida, could have been prevented if the UK Government had followed advice to fortify flour with folic acid.

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78 countries, including the United States, add folic acid to cereal grain and flour, with many health experts believing the UK should follow suit. With more here's our health correspondent, Dominic Hughes. Spina bifida occurs when a baby is still in the womb and is known as a neural tube defect which can affect the brain. Very often these cases lead to termination, stillbirth, the death of the newborn baby or serious disability. Some protection can come from folic acid, naturally present in some foods, cereals and wholemeal bread. But it is hard to consume enough from purely natural sources, so the Department of Health has been advising pregnant women to take folic acid supplement since 1992. New research suggests as many as 28% of women ignore the advice and don't take folic acid while pregnant. In 1998 the authorities in the US started adding folic acid to flour for bread and since then have seen a dramatic fall in babies

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developing these defects. If the UK had adopted a similar policy, researchers say that since 1998 more than 2000 cases would have been avoided. It is getting to women who are basically healthy before they are pregnant when we have around 50% of pregnancies in this country that are still unplanned. It was always a tall order that would need a massive sustained campaign over and over again. No government has really tackled that head-long. Successive governments have been advised to follow the US example and introduce folic acid to flour for bread, most recently in October. The Department of Health has said they are still considering the latest recommendations.