# Thousands of babies suffer BIRTH DEFECTS due to 'failure to add folic acid to bread'

### THE GOVERNMENT is to blame for thousands of British babies suffering birth defects, researchers reveal.

By [FELICITY THISTLETHWAITE](http://www.express.co.uk/journalist/122356/Felicity-Thistlethwaite)

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Worryingly, over 2,000 babies have suffered serious defects such as spina bifida since 1998.

Members of the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) believe this number is due to the Government's failure to add folic acid to flour.

These cases - around 150 a year - could have been avoided if the UK had followed 78 other countries and added the key vitamin to flour, they claim.

Only last month, 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.

Vocal members of SACN pointed out there has been a rising number of abortions in England and Wales for neural tube defects.



GETTY

Folic acid is really important for a baby's development in the womb

NTDs are birth defects of the brain, spine, or spinal cord, and they usually happen in the first month of pregnancy.

From 1998 to 2012, 1.28 pregnancies per 1,000 births were affected by a neural tube defect, of which 81 per cent resulted in an abortion.

The research was carried out by experts including from Queen Mary University London, Public Health England (PHE) and Oxford University.

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.

Unfortunately, research has revealed over 70 per cent of women do not take these supplements.

In the US, fortifying flour with folic acid has led to a 23 per cent reduction in neural tube defects.

The new research, published online in the Archives of Disease in Childhood, estimates the number of defects that could have been avoided if the UK had adopted a flour fortification policy in 1998, the same year the US adopted the policy.

Researchers said 2,014 cases of defects could have been prevented - especially given asking women to take supplements is not working and fortifying flour is "remarkably safe".

They said: "Our results show that in the UK between 1998 and 2012, there was little, if any, change in the prevalence of pregnancies with a neural tube defect, while in the USA, quickly following the introduction of mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid in 1998, there was an approximate 23 per cent reduction in the occurrence of affected births.

"Given the evidence from the Medical Research Council Vitamin Study regarding the efficacy of folic acid in preventing neural tube defects, the failure of Britain to fortify flour with folic acid has had significant consequences.

"The recent evidence that only 28% of pregnant women in England in 2012 took folic acid supplements at the correct time indicates that, in practice, recommending folic acid supplementation is largely ineffective."

Researchers at Queen Mary University London compared the situation with thalidomide, which resulted in the births of 500 people with disabilities in the UK.

"Justifiably, steps were introduced to immediately halt the epidemic, and regulatory precautions were introduced to avoid another similar epidemic," they said.

"Unfortunately, no such sense of urgency has been applied to the prevention of spina bifida.

"It is a public health failure that Britain has not implemented the fortification of flour with folic acid for the prevention of spina bifida and other (neural tube defects)."

They said this failure "has caused, and continues to cause, avoidable terminations of pregnancy, stillbirths, neonatal deaths and permanent serious disability in surviving children".

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