**Hundreds of birth defects 'due to a lack of folic acid': More than 2,000 babies said to have died or been left disabled because ministers refused to accept nutritional advice**

* **Scientists have repeatedly asked the Government to add folic acid to flour**
* **Defects of the brain, spine or spinal cord are not decreasing in the UK**
* **Pregnant women need 400 micrograms a day for the first three months**
* **85% of British women aged 16 to 49 have low folic acid levels**

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More than 2,000 babies have died or suffered a disability because of ministers’ refusal to adopt expert nutritional advice on folic acid, experts have warned.

Scientists have repeatedly advised the Government to ensure food companies add folic acid to flour, a measure they say reduces the risk of children being born with serious defects such as spina bifida.

Now researchers at six British universities have calculated that 2,000 pregnancies associated with major defects would have been avoided since 1998 if Ministers had taken the advice.

These cases - around 150 a year - would never have happened had the UK followed 78 other countries and added the key vitamin to flour, they said.

Rates of neural tube defects - birth defects of the brain, spine or spinal cord - are not falling across the UK, resulting in the death of the fetus or newborn baby, or life-long disability in those who survive.

Experts on the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition wrote to ministers in October 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.

Ministers are thought to have stalled on implementing the health measure because they feared a backlash over what some might describe as the mass medication of the population.

The NHS advises that most people should be able to obtain the recommended dose of folic acid from a balanced diet alone, but women are advised to take 400 micrograms of folic acid daily whilst trying to conceive and for the first three months of pregnancy.

However, the official figures show 85 per cent of British women aged 16 to 49 have low folic acid levels.

And further research has found that more than 70 per cent of women do not take supplements regularly or early enough in pregnancy.

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

The new research, published in the Archives of Disease in Childhood journal, 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 in pregnancy could have been prevented - equivalent to a 21 per cent drop in cases.

Many of these women would have decided to terminate the pregnancy, the researchers said.

But assuming there had been no terminations, around half of babies would have died during the pregnancy.

The other half – about 1,000 – would have either been aborted or born disabled, they calculated.

The authors are from the universities of Queen Mary in London, Oxford, Newcastle, Bristol, Leicester and Southampton, as well as Public Health England and Public Health Wales.

They wrote: ‘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 US, 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.

‘The failure of Britain to fortify flour with folic acid has had significant consequences.’

They 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,’ the academics wrote.

‘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].’

Dr Alison Tedstone, chief nutritionist at Public Health England, said: ‘Implementing the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition’s advice to add folic acid to flour would reduce the risk of birth defects, such as spina bifida, in pregnancy.

‘Public Health England’s analysis shows that 85 per cent of 16 to 49-year-old women have folic acid levels below the new World Health Organisation recommendation for women entering pregnancy.

‘This highlights the importance for pregnant women, and those trying or likely to get pregnant, of taking a daily folic acid supplement of 400 micrograms - before and up to the 12th week of pregnancy.’

The charity Shine, which supports thousands of families affected by spina bifida and hydrocephalus, has been lobbying for folic acid to be added to food for more than a decade.

It believes ministers have failed to take action because they fear it would be unpopular with voters.

A Department of Health spokesman said: ‘The Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition submitted recommendations to Government around folic acid and bread in October. We are currently considering these.’