No added folic acid in flour causing ‘defects’ in babies  
  
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**Around 2,000 babies have suffered serious defects such as spina bifida since 1998 owing to the government’s failure to add folic acid to flour, researchers have said.**

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 said.

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

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.

Members of the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) pointed to a rising number of abortions in England and Wales for neural tube defects, with 420 in 2013, up from 390 in 2012 and 299 in 2009.

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.

However, research has found that over 70 per cent of women do not take the 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 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.