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Failure to fortify **flour** is causing more disability than thalidomide scandal, warn researchers;   
The government has been dragging its feet over **folic acid** supplementation even though it could prevent 150 babies being disabled each year  
  
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The failure to put **folic acid** in **flour** is leaving 150 babies a year severely from diseases like spina bifida and causing more deformities than the thalidomide health scandal of the 50s and 60s, researchers have warned.

**Folic acid** is crucial to the healthy development of a baby in the womb and yet although pregnant women have been urged to take **folic acid** supplements for decades the rates of neural tube defects - **birth** **defects** of the brain, spine or spinal cord - have not fallen.

The Food Standards Agency, the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition and the Chief Medical Officer Dame Sally Davies have all called for it to be added to bread, but the government has so far taken no action .

"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" Prof Joan Morris Queen Mary, University of London

Now new research has shown the devastating cost of delays. Researchers from Queen Mary University of London compared Britain to the US, where bread has been supplemented with **folic acid** - the synthetic form of vitamin B9 - since 1998.

Based on the success of the scheme in the US, scientists concluded that if a similar policy had been in place in the UK between 1998 and 2012, more than 2,000 babies would not have been born disabled or aborted, around 150 a year.

The researchers compares the situation to thalidomide, which resulted in the births of 500 people with growth abnormalities in the UK when pregnant women were given the drug to ease morning sickness.

A team led by Professor Joan Morris, of the Wolfson Institute of Preventive Medicine at Queen Mary said the failure to fortify **flour** has had 'significant consequences.'

"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," she said.

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

Researchers say that the UK should follow the lead of the US and 77 other countries, to curb the associated toll of foetal and infant death and disability.

They compare the current 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 write in a paper for the journal Archive of Childhood Diseases.

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

"It is illogical to take preventive public health action to avoid a drug-induced congenital anomaly, but to largely ignore action in relation to a congenital anomaly which can be prevented by vitamin fortification of **flour**, when the failure to act has resulted in, and continues to result in, many more serious cases."

In 1991 the UK Medical Research Council Vitamin Study showed that a supplement of **folic acid** taken before and during early pregnancy cut the risk of neural tube defects by around 72 per cent.

In 1992 the Department of Health in England advised women to take **folic acid** supplements before pregnancy to reduce their risk of having a baby with a neural tube defect, but the evidence shows that fewer than one in three women take them.

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