

Put folic acid in bread to cut birth defects, urge doctors

Chris Smyth Health Editor

Hundreds of babies a year could be spared birth defects by adding folic acid to flour, say some of the country's leading doctors — who today urge ministers to “prevent countless family tragedies”.

Women endure late-term abortions and babies are born with life-long disability because of government reluctance to make a harmless tweak to food law, it is claimed.

Britain must follow the US and more than 80 other countries in compelling manufacturers to add folic acid because there is “very clear evidence” that this would halve neural tube defects such as spina bifida, say Lesley Regan, president of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, and Neena Modi, president of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health.

In a letter to *The Times* they join Gill Walton, chief executive of the Royal College of Midwives, and other specialists in reproductive health to say that the policy would “lead to long-lasting improvements in the health of our population”.

About 1,000 babies a year develop neural tube defects, often because their mothers are not getting enough folic acid, and four in five foetuses are aborted when this is discovered. The vitamin, which helps the formation of the brain and spine, is found in green vegetables such as spinach as well as beans and whole grains, but many people do not get enough and women trying to conceive are advised to take supplements.

However, only a quarter of women take supplements at the crucial early stage of pregnancy and the official scientific advisory committee on nutrition (SACN) has long recommended that folic acid be added to white bread flour.

In July the committee again advised the government to act and last week the

Scottish and Welsh governments jointly urged Jeremy Hunt, the health secretary, to implement the recommendations.

“Governments in Scotland and Wales are united in calling for this important change and we have an opportunity to ensure that all women and babies across the UK can benefit,” doctors write in today's letter. “There is very clear evidence that fortification will prevent approximately half of all neural tube defects. If the UK government decides to add folic acid to flour, it will prevent countless family tragedies.”

White bread flour is fortified with calcium, iron and other minerals and the industry has no objection to adding folic acid. Gordon Polson, director of the Federation of Bakers, said the cost was “not going to be mega...it's obviously something that could be done”. However, he said it was up to the government to make a medical and political choice about whether to go ahead.

White bread accounts for more than 70 per cent of all bread sales and is also most likely to be eaten by women who are deficient in folic acid.

Lord Rooker, a former chairman of the Food Standards Agency and Labour peer who has introduced a private member's bill on the issue, said: “Over 80 countries have done it with no ill effects, it doesn't cost the taxpayer anything and you're avoiding huge distress. Every week you've got 16 families having to terminate after 20 weeks. It's managing [defects] by termination and it's outrageous.”

Ministers have previously emphasised advice that women take supplements, saying it should be a matter of individual choice, but have paid little attention to the issue. A Department of Health spokesman said: “We will carefully consider [SACN's] conclusions and respond in due course.”

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