

Folic acid added to flour to prevent brain and spinal conditions in fetuses

- Defra launches UK-wide consultation on the Bread and Flour Regulations on the amount of folic acid to be added to flour
- Under the government's proposals, pregnancies affected by neural tube defects could fall by more than a fifth

The number of pregnancies affected by life-threatening issues such as spina bifida could fall by more than a fifth as the government moves one step closer to actively adding folic acid to non-wholemeal flour.

Following a consultation with industry and stakeholders on whether to add folic acid to non-wholemeal flour, a public health policy which has already been successful in Australia, New Zealand and Canada, today the government is consulting on its proposal to add 250 micrograms of folic acid per 100 grams of flour.

The proposal on the amount of folic acid to be added to flour is part of the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) consultation on the Bread and Flour Regulations, which aims to ensure the regulations are consistent with other food standards legislation.

Neural tube defects are a rare developmental condition which occurs very early in pregnancy and affects around 1,000 pregnancies each year in the UK. This occurs when the brain, spine, or spinal cord do not develop properly in the womb and can cause life-threatening health issues.

Women are advised to take a daily 400-microgram folic acid supplement before conceiving and up to the 12th week of pregnancy as it reduces the risk of neural tube defects affected pregnancies. However, as pregnancies may be unplanned or women in the first few weeks of pregnancy may not know they are pregnant, many women may be unaware of this recommendation.

Adding folic acid will mean foods made with flour, such as bread, will actively help avoid around 200 neural tube defects each year – around 20% of the annual UK total.

Defra Food Minister Victoria Prentis said:

It is vital that we consult on this issue to understand views on all of our proposed amendments to bread and flour regulations.

Folic acid fortification is an example of how we can ensure the public receive the nutrition we require through everyday food products.

The government's Bread and Flour Regulations consultation proposes adding 250 micrograms of folic acid per 100 grams of non-wholemeal flour.

Minister for Public Health Maggie Throup said:

Neural tube defects can have a devastating impact on life expectancy and quality of life.

This simple step will ensure more women who might be pregnant, or who are trying to conceive, will have increased intakes of folic acid, leading to a large reduction in the number of fetuses affected by NTDs each year.

I want to encourage anyone with an interest in this issue to participate in the consultation and help us deliver life-saving changes.

The proposal forms part of a UK-wide consultation on the Bread and Flour Regulations which aims to support UK industry, help lead to improved public health outcomes, assist enforcement authorities and protect UK consumers. It will ensure the regulations are consistent with other food standards legislation, covering the specifications of vitamins and minerals added to foods.

The consultation opens on Thursday 1 September and closes on Wednesday 23 November. It is open to everyone and is available here:

<https://consult.defra.gov.uk/food-compositional-standards/bread-and-flour-consultation-2022>