



An open letter to the Minister for Public Health, Seema Kennedy MP 10th May 2019 • Consultation on Mandatory Fortification of Flour with Folic Acid

Dear Seema Kennedy,

We were pleased to hear at Health Questions on 7 May 2019 that you are fully committed to launching a consultation on mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid. The launch was initially announced by Steve Brine MP, the then Minister for Public Health, during Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus Awareness Week in October 2018. However, since then, there has been little progress.

Folic acid is proven to reduce the occurrence of neural tube defects (NTDs) during pregnancy but needs to be taken in advance of conception. Unfortunately, there is a significant downward trend in folate intake amongst women of childbearing age, reflected in a fall in blood folate levels, with 90% of women of childbearing age in the UK now having a blood folate concentration under the level associated with reduced risk of NTDs. Given that about 45% of pregnancies are unplanned, mandatory fortification could make a real difference to the health and well-being of women.

The Government's Scientific and Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) has made the recommendation several times over in the past twenty-five years. The devolved governments in Wales and Scotland have openly voiced their support, and the Chief Medical Officers in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland are strongly in favour. Over 80 countries across the world, including the United States, Canada and Australia, are already fortifying flour with folic acid with significant, positive benefits.

A 2015 study* has already conservatively estimated that over 2000 fewer NTD births or terminations could have been prevented between 1998 and 2012 had we introduced this policy when it was first recommended. Every month of delay adds to this number.

A decision on the mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid could mean:

- Fewer children will be born with neural tube defects, such as spina bifida and anencephaly
- Fewer families will have to make the heart-breaking decision to terminate a pregnancy at 20+ weeks
- Fewer parents will have to agonise whilst their new born baby (or indeed mum and her baby in the womb) undergo intensive and life-threatening surgery
- Fewer Mums will see a pregnancy through to term, knowing their baby will be still born or will die soon after birth.

We believe the case for folic acid fortification is very strong, and it is time to consider the practicalities fully through a consultation process. We urge you to keep your commitment to launching the consultation before the 2019 summer recess. * <https://adc.bmj.com/content/101/7/604>

Yours sincerely,

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Shine

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Fortification