



# Sixty seconds on . . . fortified flour

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## The year of fortification?

It would seem so. The UK government has announced a consultation<sup>1</sup> on introducing mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid to help reduce neural tube defects in babies, by raising the folate levels of women who could become pregnant.

## What's the rationale?

The UK currently has 1000 diagnoses of neural tube defects such as spina bifida and anencephaly every year, and evidence from elsewhere in the world suggests that mandatory fortification could prevent around half of these cases.

## But doesn't the UK already fortify flour?

Only in some products on a voluntary basis. And as the government acknowledges, this approach hasn't worked. Data from the past nine years shows that folate intakes of women who could become pregnant have continued to decline and are particularly low in areas of deprivation.

## So why has it taken so long to make this move?

The administrative burden, the potential impact on business, and concerns that fortification risked people consuming harmful levels of folate have all played a part. But with the evidence clearer and the voluntary scheme failing to increase folate levels, the government has decided that some flour power is required.

## Is the UK an outlier on this?

Increasingly so. There are now more than 60 nations including Australia, Canada, and the US which have mandatory folic acid fortification. The countries that have mandated have seen falls in rates of neural tube defects of between 16% and 58%, and have not identified increased risks associated with fortification.

## How have doctors responded to the news?

Medical organisations have long been calling for mandatory folic acid fortification and are pleased that the government seems to be using its loaf. The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists said fortification was “simple, safe, and evidence based, and will ensure all women receive adequate folic acid through their diet.”

## Are there any dissenting voices?

Industry will be keen to ensure that any policy doesn't harm or disrupt their business. To allay such concerns, the government has pledged to develop proposals that are “proportionate, effective, and ultimately enforceable.”

1 Department of Health and Social Care. Proposal to add folic acid to flour: consultation document. 13 June 2019. [www.gov.uk/government/consultations/adding-folic-acid-to-flour/proposal-to-add-folic-acid-to-flour-consultation-document](http://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/adding-folic-acid-to-flour/proposal-to-add-folic-acid-to-flour-consultation-document).

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