

Public Health experts say that adding folic acid to bread flour is an important step to prevent unnecessary health risks.

The [New Zealand College of Public Health Medicine](#) welcomes today's announcement that the addition of the B vitamin, folic acid, to non-organic bread-making wheat flour has been approved. This is an important opportunity to address a preventable health risk", says Dr Miller.

In New Zealand, diets usually contain low levels of folic acid. Supplementation of folic acid intake during the early stages of pregnancy is important to reduce the risks of neural tube defects in the developing baby. These neural tube defects can lead to miscarriages, stillbirths or to serious birth defects, such as spina bifida and anencephaly.

Neural tube defects affect around 26 live births a year in New Zealand and cause at least nine stillbirths and 29 induced terminations. There are also likely to be many spontaneous miscarriages related to a lack of dietary folate. Māori are disproportionately affected, with almost double the number of neural tube defect-affected livebirths as for NZ European women. The impact of neural tube defect pregnancies on surviving children, parents and whānau is significant, and preventable.

"Current recommendations are that those considering pregnancy should take folic acid supplementation from four weeks prior to conception up until three months after conception", says College president Dr Jim Miller. "However, while supplementation is possible for planned pregnancies, in many cases the pregnancy is unplanned, or a doctor's visit is delayed.

The current approach to improving folic acid intake, which relies on voluntary fortification of bread by large bread makers, has not worked well enough to increase folic acid fortification to the levels that are needed", says Dr Miller. "A voluntary code was introduced in 2011. After six years of working to the voluntary code, in 2017, the volume of bread being fortified had increased to only 38%, from a starting point of 14%.

Fortification of a staple food is a low-cost, efficient and equitable way to ensure adequate folic acid in the diet for those who most need it", says Dr Miller. "Fortification of non-organic bread-making wheat flour is a good way to achieve this". Whilst folic acid in bread is safe, other non-fortified products will be available for those who prefer them.

ENDS

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