



HFMA UPDATE

by Martin Last,
Director General

When bread alone won't do!

Starting a new family is one of the happiest times we can experience and getting the best healthy start in life is vital. Indeed, Government advice since 1994 has been that women of childbearing age should consume both more foods rich in folate and a daily 400mcg folic acid supplement. This level of supplement intake, when taken daily before and during pregnancy, has conclusively been scientifically proven to reduce the risk of Neural Tube Defect (NTD) in newborn children.

The Government is currently passing through new regulations to introduce the mandatory fortification of non-wholemeal wheat flour with folic acid. This means that technical changes in production will occur to facilitate this. In England, this 'Bread and Flour Amendment Regulations 2024' is planned to be adopted on July 15, 2024, for entry into force on October 1, 2026. The adopted dates vary for other parts of the UK.

The HFMA does not have any issue with this proposed measure to fortify flour so long as it is accompanied by a long-term communication strategy to effectively reach women of childbearing age on the need for supplementation during pregnancy at the levels needed and as recommended by the Government. A position that the HFMA has taken consistently since 1994.

However, now and as part of this new regulation's passing into law, the HFMA has seen consultation from DEFRA which unfortunately raises concern. It is noted that whilst this consultation states that the regulation is needed to '... improve public health by reducing the incidence of neural tube defect by increasing dietary intake of folate for women who could become pregnant...', it fails to mention of the need for supplementation when planning or during pregnancy, the amount required, and without any reference

to ongoing education, and does not recognise such protection will not be possible from diet alone. The HFMA has already responded to this consultation, stating this need for supplementation and ongoing education.

The proposed level of fortification of 250mcg folic acid per 100g flour, will provide about 40mcg folic acid per medium cut slice of large white bread (35g). This means that if white bread were the only source of fortified flour consumed in the diet, about 10 slices would be needed daily to provide an additional 400mcg of folic acid.

Recent National Diet and Nutrition Surveys (NDNS) data show that on average, women aged 19-64 years currently eat 40g white bread per day. As women are recommended to increase their dietary folate intake from foodstuffs from 200mcg to 300mcg per day during pregnancy and to take a supplement of 400mcg during the first trimester, the total recommended intake is 700mcg per day, which equates to about 17.5 slices of bread.

Of course, women who eat only wholemeal, gluten-free or speciality breads will receive no uplift in their folic acid intake from fortification. It is also of note that there has been a 25 per cent reduction in bread intake per person since 2006. This is unlikely to be reversed considering many women curtail their intake of bread as a strategy to maintain their ideal body weight, or to lose weight. Calorie intake from 10 slices of bread is 875kcal. Hence, eating sufficient bread to achieve the recommended intake of folic acid for maximum risk reduction is an unrealistic option.



Other sources of fortified flour, from cakes and biscuits, for example, provide even more calories per 100g than white bread.

Whilst this mandatory fortification will undoubtedly improve the overall folate status of the general UK population, perhaps counterintuitively, it will become more important, rather than less important, to raise awareness among women to take a daily 400mcg folic acid supplement while trying to conceive and during the first trimester of pregnancy. This means the 400mcg requirement provided by a dietary supplement remains as important as ever.

The HFMA is taking every opportunity to lobby Government to understand and implement this need. The appointment of Cavendish as our political advisors has meant we are able to step up this lobbying, given the timing of this new legislation.

The HFMA is reinforcing its position that there needs to be continuing government recommendation and long-term education to take a daily 400mcg folic acid supplement for at least a month prior to possible conception until 12 weeks of pregnancy, despite the mandatory addition of folic acid to flour. The HFMA noted that this continued approach was a position also advised by the Scientific Advisory committee on Nutrition (SACN) in 2006.

The HFMA continues to address the issues facing our industry even when they are complex and to keep at the forefront of the regulatory and political agenda in order to help defend our industry and represent the interests of our members. If you would like to know more about the benefits of membership to your company, simply visit our website, www.hfma.co.uk, to learn more, or contact me directly at martin@hfma.co.uk

HFMA membership is vital to ensure that your company keeps abreast of the fast-changing regulatory environment. The HFMA is the UK's best source of information and most effective defender of our industry's interests. To help the HFMA defend your business at this most critical time, contact hfma@hfma.co.uk or call 020 8481 7100.

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