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Fortification is not the complete answer

Ahead of the planned UK Government consultation on adding folic acid to flour this coming spring, now is a good time to review the benefits of folic acid, a B-group vitamin. Known as folate when found naturally in food such as green leafy vegetables and yeast extract, and folic acid when it is added to foods such as breakfast cereals, spreads or used in dietary supplements, folate is essential to the healthy development of babies in early pregnancy. The neural tube (which forms the brain and spinal cord) closes and fuses in early pregnancy, and if it doesn't close, the result is a neural tube defect (NTD) such as anencephaly or spina bifida.

In the UK, recommendations are made to women who could become pregnant to take 400µg folic acid per day before conception and in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy. For



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women with spina bifida or with a child with an NTD, and all women with diabetes, the recommendation is to take 5mg per day. Despite these recommendations, approximately 90% of British women of child-bearing age (16-49 years) have a red blood cell folate concentration indicating elevated risk of NTDs.

Over 80 countries have introduced mandatory folic acid fortification of staple foods such as flour, leading to a reduction in NTD-affected pregnancies from 27% to over 50%. But regardless of a country's fortification status, women

are recommended to consume folic acid supplements prior to pregnancy because mandatory fortification is not sufficient enough to meet the increased folic acid needs of pregnant women.

Folic acid was the focus on the recent All Parliamentary Party Group (APPG) Micronutrients and Health meeting on 20 November. Dietary modelling work undertaken by the Food Standards Scotland was shared, demonstrating a number of scenarios which reduced the number of people with low intakes of folic acid, and the number of people with intakes above 1,000µg, the current upper level. This upper level is now being reviewed by the Committee on Toxicology, with some, such as Professor Nicolas Ward, who attended the APPG meeting, believing it to be too conservative.

Getting the best from the HFMA

The Micronutrients and Health All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG), the secretariat for which is managed by the HFMA, meets quarterly to discuss issues relating to public health and in particular the role of micronutrients in health.

Chaired by Carolyn Harris MP, it is a chance for members to interact with parliamentarians about the issues affecting their businesses, ask questions and hear from expert speakers about relevant research. Since its first meeting in 2016, topics have included pre-conception nutrition, nutritional issues in older people and improving nutrition in the teenage population. See <https://bit.ly/2QfLFCA> for details.

IS PALM OIL THE NEW PLASTIC?

Supermarket Iceland sparked a huge media controversy recently after its Christmas TV advert – a repurposed Greenpeace video highlighting the serious threat palm oil poses to orangutans – was rejected by Clearcast for being too political. Many consumers were enraged, and immediately took to social media to ensure the film was spread far and wide, resulting in a very successful day for deforestation campaigners (and, in fact, Iceland's PR team).

Palm oil is a main ingredient in a wide variety of foods, principally ready-to-eat products such as nut butters, cereals, baked goods and protein bars. The oil is so widely used as it is cost-

effective to produce, and is also entirely plant-based so food manufacturers are able to use it in vegan products.

So what, if anything, is a better alternative?

The situation is a complex one because substitutes for palm oil such as soya, rapeseed or sunflower oil require up to ten times the amount of land needed to generate the same volumes of oil, which can potentially have even more of a severe and lasting environmental impact.

On top of this, responsibly-sourced palm oil is still being vastly under-utilized. Currently, only 19% of the world's palm oil is obtained from sustain-

able sources, meaning there should be a real, active focus on encouraging more manufacturers to switch to RSPO-certified sources.

The sustainability of food products is of growing importance to consumers, and in light of this backlash we're likely to see more questions being raised around why palm oil is still being used, as well as calls for more transparency from retailers and manufacturers on where it is found. We want to encourage increased transparency, but also raise awareness that there are indeed more responsible ways to produce palm oil to reduce its environmental impact and help save our planet.

News ...

Top trends of 2019

With a new year comes new trends, and we're expecting 2019 to be a great one in terms of new product developments in natural health. Having consulted a host of industry experts, manufacturers and the media, the five trends we predict will be top of the agenda this year are:

1. Nootropics: supplements that boost cognitive ability.
2. Personalized daily vitamins: personalized boxes of VMS delivered to consumers, based on their individual needs.
3. Vegan keto diets: high-fat, low-carb, vegan eating regimes.
4. Fermented food and drink: gut-friendly, probiotic fermented foods such as kimchi.
5. Mesonutrients: the core micronutrient ingredients that contain the health benefit, eg curcumin, the anti-inflammatory part of turmeric.