MEDIA ALERT

HEALTH FOOD INDUSTRY HIGHLIGHTS THE IMPORTANCE OF FOLIC ACID SUPPLEMENTS BEFORE AND DURING PREGNANCY AS WELL AS THE 'FIRST-STEP' OF FORTIFIED FLOUR

- **Fortifying flour will help to reduce risk of neural tube defects such as spina bifida, particularly in unplanned pregnancies**
- **Despite this new measure, women planning a pregnancy should continue to take a 400 microgram supplement while trying to conceive**
- **It is estimated that 7 slices of bread per day are needed to achieve the recommended intake of folic acid for protection against neural tube defects**

[London, 21 September 2021] The Government's announcement that folic acid will be added to non-wholemeal wheat flour across the UK to help prevent spinal defects in babies, has been welcomed as a first step towards better folic acid consumption across the nation[i].

The Health Food Manufacturers' Association (HFMA) also welcomes the Government's acknowledgment of the important role of folic acid supplementation during pregnancy in reducing the risks of Neural Tube Defects (NTDs), such as spina bifida and anencephaly.

Whilst there is no question that the overall folate status of the general population will improve as a result of mandatory fortification, raising awareness and education of the need to take a 400mcg folic acid supplement while trying to conceive and during the first trimester of pregnancy will become even more important.

"Folic acid supplements taken while trying to conceive and *during the first trimester of pregnancy are proven to reduce the risk of Neural Tube Defects in the foetus. In addition to this welcome announcement, Government advice remains that women should take a 400 microgram supplement of folic acid daily for at least a month prior to conception and until 12 weeks of pregnancy. Whilst we welcome the folic acid boost from non-wholemeal bread and other flour products,* women should still continue to take a supplement for maximum protection" says Dr Michèle Sadler, **Scientific Advisor to the Health Food Manufacturers' Association** and lead author of the approved EU Health Claim application for folic acid's role in reducing the risk of neural tube defects.

Consumption levels and cost
The expected level of fortification will provide about 60 micrograms of folic acid per slice of bread. It will therefore take about seven slices of fortified bread to consume the recommended daily intake of folic acid to reduce risk of NTDs. Hence the need to continue with advice to take a folic acid supplement.

Only food supplements can guarantee exact dosages of nutrients, as well as proving to be more cost effective than additional bread. 400mcg folic acid supplements can be purchased for less than 1p a day. To consume the equivalent levels of folic acid through bread would cost an additional 35p per day.

"There is no question that the overall folate status of the general population will improve as a result of mandatory fortification. There is, however, a real risk that this programme may have the

reverse of the intended effect. If thorough awareness and education is not provided, women are at risk of relying solely on, say, a couple of slices of toast each day as their source of folate. This modest intake would not sufficiently protect from NTDs and if it detracts from the message to take a folic acid supplement could, perversely, not achieve the desired increase in folate status among the demographic that needs it most," **says Graham Keen, Executive Director of the HFMA.**

Available for Interview:

- **Dr Michele Sadler, Scientific Advisor to the Health Food Manufacturers' Association**

-ENDS-

Background

Folic Acid: Supplementary needs

- It is estimated that 7 slices of fortified bread will be required to consume the recommended daily intake of 400mcg of folic acid
- On average, women eat 76g of bread per day[ii], which will provide just 107mcg folic acid*
- Bread sales per person have decreased by nearly 25% since 2006, from 692g per person per week to 521g.[iii]
- NTDs affect around one in 1,000 pregnancies, with 190 babies born alive with an NTD in the UK every year.[iv,v,vi,vii]

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The HFMA

The Health Food Manufacturers' Association (HFMA) is the voice of the UK's natural health industry and represents nearly 150 manufacturers and suppliers of natural health products. Founded in 1965, the HFMA is a not-for-profit organisation which operates long-standing codes of practice to ensure that member companies adhere to high standards and offer good quality, safe products supported by responsible, lawful information. For further information about the HFMA, visit www.hfma.co.uk.

**If UK bread is fortified at the same levels as Australian bread, at 2 to 3 mg of folic acid per kilo of bread*

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[i] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-58615838

[ii] https://www.ukflourmillers.org/flourbreadconsumption

[iii] Wunsch, NG. (2020 December 16). Weekly household consumption of bread in the United Kingdom (UK) 2006-2019. Available at: https://www.statista.com/statistics/284434/weekly-household-consumption-of-bread-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/ [Accessed 20 September 2021]

[iv] Morris JK. et al. Prevention of neural tube defects in the UK: a missed opportunity. Archives of Disease in Childhood. 2016; 101(7): 604-607. http://adc.bmj.com/content/101/7/604

[v] Office for National Statistics: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarri... [website accessed 12 December 2017]

[vi] National Records of Scotland: 2016 Births, Deaths and Other Vital Events - Preliminary Annual Figures: https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/statistics-and-data/statistics/statistics-... [website accessed 12 December 2017]

[vii] Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. Births. Live births 1887-2016. https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/monthly-births [website accessed 12 December 2017]