

## Mandatory folic acid fortification in Australia

### What is mandatory folic acid fortification?

From September 2009 Mandatory folic acid fortification requires Australian millers to add folic acid (a form of the B vitamin folate) to wheat flour for bread-making purposes. This means most bread in Australia will contain added folic acid.

### What is folate/folic acid?

Folate is a B group vitamin we all need for healthy growth and development, especially of our nervous systems. This vitamin is known as folate when occurring naturally in food, such as green leafy vegetables. Folic acid is the 'man made' form used in supplements or added to food. Folic acid is more easily absorbed than naturally-occurring folate.

### Who needs folic acid and why?

Folic acid is important to the healthy development of babies in early pregnancy. A baby's growth is the most rapid in the first weeks of life - often before a woman is aware she is pregnant. The neural tube closes and fuses very early in pregnancy; if it doesn't close, the result is a neural tube defect such as spina bifida. Folic acid taken at recommended levels for at least one month before and three months after conception can prevent the occurrence of most neural tube defects.

### Why must folic acid be added to flour?

For more than ten years, Australia and New Zealand have introduced a number of initiatives to increase the folic acid intake of women planning to or who may become pregnant to reduce the number of neural tube defects. These have included health claims on food labels, education programs, voluntary folic acid fortification of foods - such as breakfast cereals and bread - and encouraging women to take folic acid supplements. Despite these initiatives, most women of child-bearing age are still not consuming enough folic acid. Mandatory folic acid fortification has been introduced to provide additional protection against neural tube defects.

### What foods contain folic acid?

From September 2009, wheat flour for making bread must contain folic acid. This means that bread including all plain, fancy and sweet breads and rolls, bagels, foccacia, English muffins and flat breads (containing yeast) must contain added folic acid. Other products that might be made with bread making flour include crumpets, scones, pancakes, pikelets, crepes, yeast donuts, pizza bases and crumbed products. Flour mixes for domestic bread-making must also contain folic acid; however other types of packaged domestic flour are not required to contain folic acid.

Some manufacturers also choose to fortify other foods with folic acid, including breakfast cereal, yeast spread and fruit juice (voluntary fortification). Manufacturers will still be able to do this.

### Are there any bread products that do not contain folic acid?

Organic bread is not required to contain folic acid. Bread made from other cereal grains such as rice, corn and rye, provided they do not contain any wheat flour, do not have to contain folic acid. However, manufacturers may add folic acid if they wish.

### How do I know which foods contain folic acid?

Manufacturers must list folic acid in the ingredient list on the labels of foods fortified with folic acid (sometimes listed as folate). Unpackaged bread and bread that is made and/or packaged at the point of sale doesn't have to have ingredient information. This information may be available on request.

### How much folic acid do women need?

To reduce the risk of neural tube defects, women planning to or who may become pregnant should consume at least 400 micrograms of folic acid every day. Women who have a family history of neural tube defects may require more folic acid and should ask their GP for advice about their individual needs.

### What are good sources of folic acid?

It is difficult to ensure women get enough folic acid from their diet to reduce the risks of neural tube defects in pregnancy. The best way to guarantee women get enough folic acid is to take a folic acid supplement of at least 400 micrograms every day, in addition to eating foods that have added folic acid (fortified) and are naturally rich in folate.

Foods that might be fortified with folic acid include breakfast cereals, yeast extracts and fruit juices. Mandatory fortification of bread provides an additional source of folic acid. Bread will contain an average of 120 micrograms of folic acid per 100 grams (approximately 3 slices) after mandatory fortification.

### Will having enough folic acid prevent all cases of neural tube defects?

Consuming enough folic acid substantially reduces the risk of neural tube defects but won't prevent all cases. There is more information about neural tube defects on the Australian Spina Bifida & Hydrocephalus Association (ASBHA) website at <http://www.asbha.org.au/SpinaBifidaandHydrocephalus.htm>

### Are there any adverse effects from taking folic acid?

Based on the best scientific evidence, there is no apparent risk to public health and safety from the estimated increase in folic acid intakes due to mandatory fortification. Mandatory folic acid fortification has been used safely in the United States and Canada for over 10 years. Health authorities will be monitoring the effectiveness of the increased levels of folic acid in the food supply.



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