

A lack of folic acid in a pregnant women's diet can lead to birth defects like spinabifida... But is it really necessary to fortify all bread just to help only 4% of the population who may have these problems? The most common place to find folic acid is dark green leafy vegetables, citrus fruits, lentils etc. Low income families are more likely to buy bread which is cheaper than fruit and vegetables that cost more so by buying fortified bread they have a higher chance of getting more folate in their diet. Cost may be a huge factor in the government's decision about whether or not to fortify folate into bread too. Each baby born with spinabifida costs the health system \$400,000. And in 2004, 16 babies were born with spinabifida and 29 pregnancies were terminated after scans showed the condition. Replacing the folate which is removed from wheat during milling would cut spinabifida occurring down by 80% and the total birth defects down by 40%. (1). A lack of folic acid in these pregnant women's diets may have caused their child to have spinabifida so fortifying folate into bread could stop this. The government are delaying plans to add folic acid to bread for three years, it will cost the government about 10 million in health costs and result in the equivalent of a classroom full of babies being aborted!

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A good point about fortification of breakfast cereals is that if someone doesn't eat certain foods and is lacking in a certain nutrient then by eating breakfast cereals that have that nutrient fortified in it they will be getting that nutrient. Although our bodies can tell the difference between synthetic and natural nutrients in food, our bodies don't like synthetic nutrients and don't absorb the majority of them. So people are buying these cereals under the false belief that they will be absorbing the full amount of that particular nutrient in their cereal which they won't, so are they really better off? (2) So if we can't absorb most of the nutrients then is there really any point in having them in there? Also just because if we did eat lots of fortified foods that doesn't mean we could eat unhealthily. At the end of the day you still need to be eating a well-balanced diet because of all the other benefits as well.

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Fortifying folate into bread is a cheap process which only cost ½ a cent per loaf of bread. It's cheap enough so why not do it? But is this taking away the rights of everybody by adding folate to all bread so that people don't get a choice about whether they want it or not? Is it ethically right to "mass medicate" people? Fortifying nutrients into all bread is taking away people's rights. Should everyone be forced to eat fortified bread just because a small number of the population don't follow the health advice that they are given? And is it ethically right to do this? Bakers are suggesting that some bread should be fortified and some not, that way people aren't forced to eat bread with folate in it if they don't want to and it isn't violating people's rights. Is informed voluntary consent best? If so why depart from that when it comes to fortifying bread? Wouldn't it just be easier to educate people about the importance of a high folate diet rather than forcing everyone to eat fortified folate in bread against their will? People who are well educated will already know about folate and taking supplements. Some people who may be less educated are low socio economic people. They may not even know when they are pregnant let alone about folate, how much you need and where you get it from. So fortifying bread would benefit low socio economic people as it helps them get the folate that they need. It also helps their babies stay healthy and not develop birth defects from lack of folate if they don't know if they're pregnant or not.

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Most people who are against the fortification of folate to bread are simply against having their rights taken away. They value an individual's right to make their own decisions. They believe "each person has a fundamental right to be respected and treated as a free and equal

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rational person capable of making his or her own decisions". (3) One person said "I want freedom of choice. We do not get it with fluoride in our water..... (Trev) (4)." This person has taken the ethical freedom of rights approach and believes in freedom of choice. Why should we be forced to have folate fortified bread if we don't want to?

Whereas Rotorua paediatrician Johan Morreau says doctors are "intensely frustrated" by the delay in folate fortification to bread and also "what should have been a public health decision has become the subject of a political bun-fight. There is no scientific basis to justify the delay". Johan appears to take the common good ethics approach to this dilemma. Is this an ethical dilemma or is it a public health decision? And is it really necessary to fortify all bread just to help only 4% of the population?

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There are also health concerns with fortified folic acid too. Two peer-reviewed US studies have linked too much folate to higher rate of prostate cancer and inflammatory bowel disease in children. Also in elderly people having high amounts of folate lowers their amount of vitamin B12. This can lead to neurological damage. (5) There is also new research that there may be a link between prostate cancer and colon cancer being aggravated by high amounts of folate. (6) It's not official but if this was the case and you had one of these cancers would you want to risk aggravating it by eating bread which has been fortified with folate? The government must make sure that the folate definitely won't affect their health before making the decision whether or not to fortify all bread.

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If all bread is fortified with folic acid this doesn't necessarily mean that this is a permanent solution. Fortifying folate into bread still doesn't give pregnant women and people in general the right amount of folate that they are meant to have each day. Pregnant women would still need to take a folic acid supplement as well. Also fortifying folate into bread would mean that to get the recommended amount of folate each day a woman would have to eat 11 slices of bread! Most people don't eat that much bread each day (7). Most women only eat 1.5 pieces of bread each day (8). But on the other hand at least it would be providing a source of some folate which may benefit people who would have otherwise had none. It would be a lot easier for these people to just take folate supplements wouldn't it? Fortifying folate into bread may give women a false sense of security. They may think that if they eat bread that they will have healthy babies but in actual fact they may not realise just how much bread they have to eat each day (11 slices).

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People have very different opinions about fortification of folate in bread and strong views on individual rights. One person's opinion was "so instead of mandatory, perhaps we should lobby to have separate choices of bread in the grocery store "folate fortified (decrease chances of having a child with NTD) or "no folate additives (anything can happen)" (Tui) - (9). This person is obviously challenging the common good ethics approach and believes that fortifying folate into bread will help prevent neural tube defects. I have contacted Sanitarium to find out their opinion about fortifying breads and cereals and they responded with "we feel that food fortification is a method of improving the nutritional balance in the diet of consumers as it can restore nutrients which have been lost during processing and is an important measure of minimising the risk of nutrient deficiencies occurring amongst consumers". Sanitarium has also taken the common good approach to ethics and believes that everyone's health will benefit from the fortification of foods.

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(References 1 – 9 were listed).