



“New Zealand’s peak body representing the entire health and medical research pipeline”

Submission on Folic acid fortification: Increasing folic acid availability in food New Zealand Food Safety Discussion Paper No: 2019/08

Introduction

New Zealanders for Health Research (NZHR) was established in November 2015 to bring about increased investment in health research from government, industry and philanthropy. We have a commitment to ensuring that the results of health research are translated into policy and practice. As part of our aim to bring about a society which is well informed about health and medical research in New Zealand we’ve specifically asked New Zealanders about their beliefs about the safety and effectiveness of fortifying flour with folic acid to prevent neural tube defects, and believe that our findings are relevant to the MPI consultation process.

NZHR’s submission is that fortification of flour with folic acid should be supported because:

- It is unequivocally supported by the results of health research which has been undertaken both internationally and in New Zealand
- It will have a significant impact on the incidence and prevalence of neural tube defects, including spina bifida, resulting in improved population health outcomes; a lowering of the burden of disease on society, families and individuals; and reduced health care costs
- It will be challenging to rely on people voluntarily opting to proactively and consistently include folic acid in their diets at appropriate and effective doses

Research on the benefits and risks of consuming folic acid

We refer to the June 2018 peer reviewed report produced by the Prime Minister’s Chief Science Advisor (PMCSA) and the Royal Society Te Apārangi¹.

The report concludes that there is compelling evidence that mandatory folic acid fortification is associated with lower rates of neural tube defects, and that taking folic acid supplements at the recommended doses in pregnancy has no adverse effects on pregnancy outcome or the child’s health. No evidence was found to link folic acid supplements to increased risks of neurological/cognitive decline, diabetes, or cardiovascular disease; nor was there evidence that unmetabolised folic acid that remains within the body’s circulation is harmful.

Based on an overall assessment of the evidence, and also considering the need to ensure that disadvantaged people including Māori receive benefit, the report concluded that the benefits of mandatory fortification of packaged bread with folic acid outweigh any potential adverse effects.

¹ The Health Benefits and Risks of Folic Acid Fortification of Food. A report by the Office of the Prime Minister’s Chief Science Advisor and the Royal Society Te Apārangi June 2018. <https://www.pmcsc.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/The-health-benefits-and-risks-of-folic-acid-fortification-of-food.pdf>



Impact on the incidence and prevalence of neural tube defects

Rare Disorders New Zealand estimates² that the incidence of neural tube defects in live births which could be prevented by consuming folic acid is about 24 cases per year, half of which are associated with a diagnosis of spina bifida, and half with anencephaly (which becomes fatal soon after birth). This means that there are about twelve New Zealanders per year who are unnecessarily destined for a lifetime of disability (with annual childhood rehabilitation costs of about \$400,000 per year, and a significant burden of care which is borne by their families), and a further 12 who are denied the right to life altogether. These figures are consistent with the more detailed analysis presented in the PMCSA report.

Voluntary consumption of folic acid

According to the results of NZHR's 2019 opinion poll³ 54% of respondents agreed that adding folic acid to flour and bread is a safe and effective way of preventing spina bifida and neural tube defects, 13% disagreed, and 33% didn't know. Furthermore, 47% of females aged between 18 and 34, a significant component of the folic acid target population, responded "don't know" to this question.

These figures suggest that it would be challenging to convince women to voluntarily take folic acid supplements in numbers sufficient to have a significant impact on the incidence of neural tube defects. Such supplements have already been actively marketed in New Zealand for several years with, as would appear from the NZHR poll results, only limited success.

We also note that the 13% who disagreed about the safety and effectiveness of adding folic acid to bread and flour is significantly lower than the 18% who said they disagreed with a similar statement about adding fluoride to public water supplies. We believe therefore that any public opposition to fortifying flour with folic acid would be manageable and not of sufficient magnitude to warrant not going ahead.

Conclusion

NZHR supports proposals to fortify flour with folic acid, and favour either of the report's⁴ options (3B) mandatory fortification of non-organic bread-making wheat flour, or (3C) mandatory fortification of all non-organic wheat flour.

In developing this submission we have consulted with our partners and members as set out below (and from whom we derive 100% of our funding).

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² <https://www.raredisorders.org.nz/about-us/news/folic-acid-fortification/>

³ New Zealand Speaks! 2019 Roy Morgan NZHR Opinion Poll. August 2019. <https://www.nz4healthresearch.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/NZHR-Report-2019-GENERAL-EDITION.pdf>

⁴ MPI. Folic acid fortification: Increasing folic acid availability in food New Zealand Food Safety Discussion Paper No: 2019/08. October 2019. <https://www.mpi.govt.nz/dmsdocument/37233-folic-acid-fortification-increasing-folic-acid-availability-in-food-discussion-document>



NZHR partners and members

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