



For more information, contact:

Becky Handforth
Europe Associate
Flour Fortification Initiative
bhandforth@gmail.com
Phone: 0032470406542

Workshop to Highlight Opportunities for Flour Fortification To Improve Nutrition, Prevent Birth Defects

Fortifying wheat flour with vitamins and minerals as a safe and cost-effective health intervention will be highlighted during a workshop of the European Health Forum Gastein. The workshop will begin at 9:00 a.m. on 3 October, in Congress Centre Room 2, prior to the Forum's opening session in Gastein, Austria.

The prevalence of vitamin and mineral deficiencies throughout Europe is higher than might be expected due to a number of factors. For example, people's socioeconomic situation may prevent them from buying the most nutritious foods while other people's dietary habits or religious convictions may restrict certain foods.

Fortification is the process of adding vitamins and minerals to wheat flour during the milling process so that all the foods subsequently made with fortified flour are more nutritious. Because foods made with wheat flour are commonly consumed throughout Europe, fortification has the potential to benefit millions of people in the region.

Currently 74 countries have legislation to require wheat flour fortification, and 70 of the countries include folic acid, a B vitamin, in the mandate. Folic acid is known to prevent most neural tube defects if women have enough folic acid before conception and in the first few weeks of pregnancy. These birth defects such as spina bifida and anencephaly are permanently disabling or fatal.

The true prevalence of neural tube defects is difficult to determine because miscarriages or terminations of pregnancies due to this diagnosis are not always reported, and many countries do not have birth defect surveillance systems. However EUROCAT, a network of population-based registries covering 1.7 million births in 21 European countries, reported between 1130 and 1344 neural tube



defects each year from 2006 through 2009. None of the included countries has a mandate to fortify flour with folic acid, and only one country in the region fortifies wheat flour with iron.

Fortifying flour with folic acid has proven to be especially cost-effective because children born with spina bifida usually need expensive and extensive medical care. A 2012 New Zealand study on Fortification of Bread with Folic Acid estimated that the lifetime costs of a single pregnancy affected by a neural tube defect are NZ\$ 4.8 million (€ 3 million), including direct healthcare, disability aids and building modifications, lost productivity of the disabled and their care-givers, tax efficiency losses and the value of premature mortality and suffering.

Workshop speakers will include:

- Dr. Francesco Branca, Director of Nutrition for Health and Development, World Health Organization
- Mr. Scott Montgomery, Director of the Flour Fortification Initiative and former Cargill executive
- Dr. Sue Horton, Professor and Chair in Global Health Economics, University of Waterloo
- Dr. William Dietz, Former Director of the Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- Dr. Margo Whiteford, Vice President, International Federation for Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus

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