

FINE News



Folate Information Network

June 2007



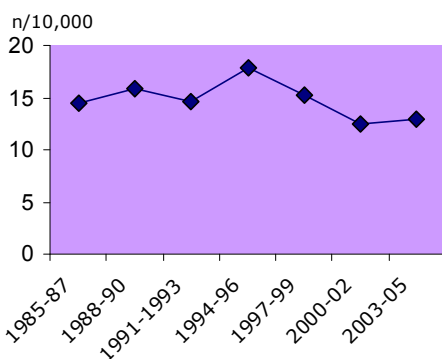
Latest news on numbers in Victoria

The latest data on all neural tube defects, NTDs, (anencephaly, spina bifida and encephalocole) from the Victorian Birth Defects Register (BDR) is for the year 2005 and has just been released in their June Bulletin, see website:

www.health.vic.gov.au/perinatal

The BDR provides average rates of NTDs per 1000 births over three year periods because the numbers in any one year are small and tend to fluctuate. The graph here, taken directly from the BDR Bulletin, shows these rates going back to 1985.

Rate of all Neural Tube Defects in Victoria, 1985-2005



The rate of NTDs has dropped since 1996, but has remained fairly steady in recent years with there being approximately 13 pregnancies in every 1000 where the baby has a NTD. In 2005, there were 66,654 births and therefore 84 pregnancies with NTDs. About half of these had spina bifida (41) and only one quarter were liveborn and survived the first 28 days of life. This means that these days there are 10-14 babies born with spina bifida each year in Victoria, but that there are many more terminations of pregnancy for all NTDs. This high rate of termination is one of the main reasons there is a major interest in promoting the uptake of folic acid by women who could become pregnant because folic acid can help prevent an NTD from forming in the developing fetus. This in turn would prevent the situation arising when a pregnant woman discovers she is carrying a fetus with an NTD and is faced with a choice in regards to continuation of her pregnancy or not.



Flour Power Update

Latest news on folic acid fortification

As has been mentioned in earlier newsletters to the SPINE (now FINE) membership, there has been an ongoing debate in Australia and New Zealand about the possibility of putting folic acid into bread flour to ensure women of child bearing age have a better chance of receiving adequate intake of folic acid. The Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) website has all the detailed documentation related to this issue. There is a lot to read as this has been going on since May 2004.

<http://www.foodstandards.gov.au/standardsdevelopment/proposals/proposalp295consider2600.cfm>

In short, FSANZ has conducted two public consultations and then made a recommendation to the Australia and New Zealand Food Regulation Ministerial Council (the Ministerial Council), proposing mandatory fortification of bread flour. In October 2006 a communiqué was issued that said...*"All Ministerial Council members reinforced their commitment to reduce the number of neural tube defects through mandatory fortification with folic acid as quickly as*

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possible. The Ministerial Council discussed the Final Assessment Report from Food Standards Australia New Zealand on a proposal for consideration of mandatory fortification of food with folic acid. Food Standards Australia New Zealand have been asked to review the proposed standard due to technical considerations with the implementation of the standard, and compliance issues, within six months."

The six months is up, there have been more stakeholder forums and reviews presented to FSANZ, and the Ministerial Council announced their decision on Friday June 22nd.

They have affirmed the draft standard for the mandatory fortification of food with folic acid as part of the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code. There will be a two year implementation period. The draft standard requires the mandatory addition of folic acid to wheat flour for bread-making within the prescribed range of 200-300 micrograms per 100 grams of flour. This fortification level is expected to prevent up to 50 neural NTDs in Australia each year.

The UK is now recommending fortification, after holding back for many years and an online 'head to head' debate is happening in the British Medical Journal. The YES side

is highlighting the inadequacy of voluntary fortification, the acknowledgement that the 'less well off' will gain most from fortification, and that there is evidence of other health benefits. They address the concerns that some people have about folic acid and its potential cancer promoting effects, this now being the most prominent concern raised by the NO advocates. There is very little evidence to support this concern, especially if the dose of folic acid is kept within the limits recommended for food fortification for the general population.

A recent publication in the Journal of the American Medical Association has shown that there may be a slightly

increased risk of cancer progression in older people with pre-existing colorectal polyps, who take a high dose of folic acid continuously for 3 – 5 years.

For a woman at increased risk of having a baby with an NTD, who is advised to take a higher dose than the general population, this concern might be more relevant. But it is not recommended that she take a high dose continuously, just when she is planning a pregnancy and in the first month. Also, most women trying to have a baby are not in the cancer risk age group.

So do not despair, but be aware, discuss with your doctor and watch this space – we will keep you informed. Also, keep in mind another more positive story published in The Lancet this month. This study indicates that folic acid can effectively reduce the risk of stroke. Obviously, there are still checks and balances to consider and we will be working with many experts to monitor and report on folic acid fortification of our bread flour and how this may affect you.

By Associate Professor Jane Halliday, Murdoch Children's Research Institute and SBFV Board member.



It's on again, the
**FOLATE AWARENESS
BREAKFAST**

Date: Thursday 6th
September
Time: 6.45am for
7.00am start
Venue: Arts Centre
Cost: \$75.00

Contact SBFV on
9663 0075 for bookings

Web Sites

- **Folate Fact Sheet** on Dept Human Services health site www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au
- **March of Dimes** (US site focused on pregnancy and baby health) www.marchofdimes.com

Publications Available

There's no such thing as a silly question

A practical guide for families living with a child with chronic illness, disability, mental illness or life-threatening condition. For a copy, contact SBFV on 9663 0075

Interested in joining the Spina Bifida Foundation of Victoria (SBFV)?

Benefits include:

- CONTACT newsletter every 3 months
- Social events
- Access to SBFV projects

Membership costs \$35 per year for an individual/family, but a concession is available for those on low incomes.

Contact the SBFV for more information on
9663 0075 or visit www.sbfv.org.au