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Wednesday, 31 July, 2002, 15:45 GMT 16:45 UK

Mothers-to-be urged to take extra iodine



Iodine during pregnancy can affect a baby's IQ

Pregnant women are putting their babies at risk by failing to consume enough iodine.

Low levels of iodine are linked to mental disability, miscarriages and stillbirths.

Studies have also shown that iodine deficiency in pregnancy women can adversely affect the mental development of infants.

But a study by doctors in Scotland has found that 40% of women across the UK consume less than half of the recommended levels of iodine.

Fish, seaweed, milk and dairy products are all good food sources of iodine.

“
Ours is the first study to have been carried out in the UK and the results are worrying”

Professor Robert Hume, Tayside Institute of Child Health

It is sometimes added to salt. However, in the UK this is not compulsory. The Scottish authors have called on the government and European Union to introduce new rules to make it mandatory.

'Worrying' results

Professor Robert Hume, of the Tayside Institute of Child Health, results are based on a survey of 400 women.

He described the findings as worrying.

"Ours is the first study to have been carried out in the UK and the results are worrying," he said.

"The science is very clear about the effects of iodine deficiency for unborn babies - irreversible mental retardation to different degrees."

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He said that in most of the expectant mothers the deficiency was not very severe, but said the effects were still serious.

Professor Hume said studies of Spanish and Italian schoolchildren had shown that youngsters who were mildly or moderately deficient in iodine have lower intelligence.

They were also less mentally developed than children of the same age who consume adequate amounts of iodine.

According to Professor Hume, preliminary results from another study - this time looking at the IQ of school children in Dundee - appeared to back up those findings.

"Iodine is important for the developing foetus.

"If the mother, due to insufficient iodine, does not supply enough thyroid hormones at a critical period, the development of the foetal brain is affected and mental potential is significantly curbed.

"Severe deprivation is associated with cretinism - when babies are mentally retarded and may also be deaf and mute."

Political campaign

Professor Hume is lobbying MPs and MEPs to make it compulsory for iodine to be added to salt.

"Adding tiny amounts of iodine to the diet takes total care of the problem.

"In the UK it has never been compulsory for manufacturers to add iodine to salt," he said.

"I believe what we have found in Tayside is only the tip of the iceberg.

"The signs are that the problem is much more widespread in Scotland, the UK and across Europe where iodine deficiency is serious.

"The science is well known, the solution is simple. What we require is government action."

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