



## PRESS RELEASE



# WHO News: Call for a World Health Assembly Resolution to fight preventable birth defects globally

## WHA Resolution

Geneva, 24 May 2022

The Global Alliance for Prevention of Spina Bifida-F (GAPSBI-F) together with the International Federation for Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus (IF) are calling for a World Health Assembly Resolution to fight preventable birth defects globally.

GAPSBI-F is an international alliance of clinicians, researchers and advocates aiming to advance the prevention of [spina bifida and anencephaly](#), two severe and often fatal birth defects. These neurological conditions impact over 320,000 pregnancies every year worldwide. IF is the international organisation representing people with spina bifida and hydrocephalus (SBH) and their families worldwide. With the mission to improve the quality of life of people with SBH, to reduce the prevalence of neural tube defects and a vision of a society that guarantees human rights of children and adults with SBH.

July 20, 2021, marked the 30th anniversary of the [landmark trial](#) by the British Medical Research Council that showed folic acid (vitamin B9) could prevent the majority of cases of spina bifida and anencephaly.

**Another landmark [article](#) published on May 23, 2022 by *The Lancet Global Health* by GAPSBI-F, IF and other partners makes an urgent call to the [World Health Assembly](#), currently meeting in Geneva, Switzerland to pass a resolution for universal mandatory folic acid [fortification of staple foods](#). This resolution is an essential step toward overcoming the stalled progress on prevention of spina bifida, one of the most serious birth defects.**

The timing of folic acid intake is critical to prevent spina bifida. Folic acid is simply a vitamin, B9. Although vitamin B9 (folic acid) is often given in the form of prenatal vitamins, this timing is too late to prevent these birth defects as the spinal cord is formed during the first month of pregnancy.

Food fortification with [folic acid](#); however, is a timely and underutilised solution. The [article](#) by GAPSBI-F, IF and other partners highlights the benefits of mandatory fortification as the most proven, safe, effective, sustainable, and cost-saving prevention strategy. Despite 30 years of incontrovertible

scientific evidence, according to the [Global Fortification Data Exchange](#) over 100 countries do not require fortification with folic acid. Currently, the world is only preventing a quarter of all preventable cases of spina bifida.

A WHA resolution aimed at food fortification with vitamin B9 (folic acid) will give a needed push for countries to fortify. This successful and equitable public health intervention is currently active in about 60 countries globally. **There is no excuse not to implement this intervention in all countries!**

With the WHO prioritisation of [sustainable development goals](#) (SDG), food fortification with folic acid will bring the world closer to the targets on reducing child mortality and achieving health equity. This is a smart and high-yield global health initiative. Read the GAPSBI-F article on folic acid fortification [HERE](#).

### Media Contacts / Note for the editorial office

For further information, please contact Co-Founders of the Global Alliance for Prevention of Spina Bifida (GAPSBI-F): Jeffrey Blount, MD, MPH ([jeffrey.blount@childrensal.org](mailto:jeffrey.blount@childrensal.org)) and Gail Rosseau, MD ([grosseau@gwu.edu](mailto:grosseau@gwu.edu); [gailrosseau@gmail.com](mailto:gailrosseau@gmail.com)). Or the IF team at [info@ifglobal.org](mailto:info@ifglobal.org)

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