

Healthy Eating and Pregnancy

Pregnancy is a great time to think about your diet. What you eat can impact your own health, as well as the health of your baby in both the short and long-term. Eating a healthy and varied diet will help you get the right balance of nutrients that you and your baby need. See our Factsheet on *What is a healthy diet* for more information.

Key nutrients for pregnancy

Omega-3 fatty acids

Omega-3's are important for a baby's development, particularly for your baby's brain and eyes.¹ The best dietary source of these beneficial fats is oily fish, such as salmon, trout, mackerel, anchovies, sardines and herring.

As recommended for the general population, pregnant women are also advised to eat 2 portions of fish a week, one of which should be an oily fish. As a precaution, pregnant women should not eat more than 2 portions a week of oily fish as they can contain low levels of pollutants that can build up in the body.²

Iron

Iron requirements are higher during pregnancy as you need extra iron to ensure your baby has adequate blood supply to get enough oxygen and nutrients.¹ Iron is found in red meat, pulses, eggs, nuts, green leafy vegetables, wholemeal bread, dried fruit and fortified foods such as breakfast cereals. Vitamin C helps your body absorb iron from plant foods, so try to include a variety of vegetables and fruits at meal times. Avoid drinking tea or coffee with a meal as these can decrease the amount of iron your body absorbs from plant sources.

Calcium

Calcium is important for the growth and development of your baby's bones as well as helping maintain your bones.¹ Dairy foods, such as milk, cheese and yogurt, are a great source of calcium. Calcium is also found in canned fish with soft bones such as sardines or pilchards, non-dairy milk or yogurt alternatives

with added calcium, tofu made with calcium sulphate (check the label), fortified breakfast cereals, some dark green leafy vegetables such as kale, broccoli and pak choi. Sesame seeds (tahini), dried figs and almonds are other good sources.

Vitamin supplements

During pregnancy, the requirements of some nutrients are increased. Most of these can be obtained from a healthy, balanced diet, however, you need more of some vitamins than you can get from food during pregnancy. A supplement of folic acid and vitamin D are recommended.³

Folic Acid: A daily supplement of 400 micrograms of folic acid is recommended before you become pregnant and up to 12 weeks of pregnancy.³ This is to lower the risk of neural tube defects that affect the developing nervous system.

Vitamin D: Many women of childbearing age have low vitamin D status. Vitamin D helps your baby's bones and teeth grow properly, and helps maintain your bones and teeth too. A daily supplement of 10 micrograms of vitamin D is recommended throughout your pregnancy.³

Avoid too much Vitamin A: Supplements that include vitamin A should be avoided during pregnancy as large amounts can harm your unborn baby, causing malformations. Watch out for multivitamin supplements and fish liver oil supplements that may contain vitamin A.⁴

Health Start vitamins: Some pregnant women may be entitled to free vitamins that include folic acid and vitamin D.⁵



'Eating for 2' myth

You may find when pregnant, that you are more hungry than usual, but you do not need to 'eat for 2'.⁶ Your body adapts during pregnancy and actually increases the absorption of vitamins and minerals to help meet your growing baby's needs. You only need extra calories during the third trimester, and, even then, an additional 200 calories is all that's required. That's equivalent to a small sandwich.

Hydration

Having 6 to 8 glasses of fluid daily will help keep you hydrated. You may need more than this, especially if it's hot, you are active or suffering from morning sickness.³ Your urine will be a light straw colour if you are well hydrated. If its very dark, you need more water.

Caffeine

It is recommended to limit the amount of caffeine you have during pregnancy to no more than 200milligrams (mg) per day. Too much caffeine may increase the risk of miscarriage or having a low birth-weight baby. No more than 2 mugs of coffee or three cups of tea a day.³ Some fizzy, soft drinks and chocolate also contain caffeine so keep an eye on how much you have during the day.

Alcohol in pregnancy³

Guidelines in the UK advise that pregnant women, and women planning a pregnancy should avoid alcohol. Drinking too much alcohol during pregnancy can increase the risk of your baby developing a group of problems known as foetal alcohol syndrome which include poor learning and behavioural difficulties. Speak to your GP or midwife if you have any concerns.

Foods to avoid during pregnancy?⁴

- Avoid foods or supplements with high amounts of vitamin A such as liver, cod liver oil or any multivitamin supplements with vitamin A. Also avoid liver and liver products as these have lots of vitamin A in them, which can be harmful to your unborn baby.
- Avoid eating swordfish, marlin and shark as these types of fish can be high in mercury. You should eat no more than 2 portions of oily fish per week and no more than 4 cans (140g) of tuna per week. This is because they can have pollutants in them which can be harmful to your unborn baby.
- Raw or undercooked meat or fish should be avoided as there is a small risk of getting toxoplasmosis, which can cause miscarriage.
- Some cheeses should be avoided due to certain bacteria that can grow on them, which, in rare circumstances may harm your baby. Mould-ripened soft cheeses with a white coating on the outside, such as brie or Camembert and soft blue cheeses and any unpasteurised milk or cheese should be avoided. These products may contain listeria that can cause an infection called listeriosis.
- Eggs are ok to eat raw, partially cooked and fully cooked providing they have the British Lion stamped on the shell. This stamp indicates that the eggs are less likely to have salmonella in them. Salmonella is unlikely to harm your unborn baby, but you could get food poisoning.



References

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