



Nutrition for Pregnancy

Good nutrition is a key consideration before and after pregnancy. A healthy diet ensures you have a good store of nutrients to meet the demands of your developing baby, and keeps you healthy and well. Healthy eating during pregnancy may also protect your baby against disease in later life. To make sure you get all the vitamins and minerals that you and your baby need, you should aim for a diet that includes a range of healthy foods.

There are also particular nutrients you should pay closer attention during this time including folic acid, omega 3, vitamin D, calcium and iron which we will discuss in more detail below.

Follow Healthy Eating Guidelines

Fruit and veg

These are rich in fibre, antioxidants, vitamins and minerals which are essential to both mother and baby. They are required for healthy digestion, optimum immunity, energy levels and for maintaining a healthy weight in mother. Ideally aim for 5-7 portions per day and you can do this by:

- Include a large serving of vegetables or salad and/or some fruit at each meal and snack
- Add vegetables to omelettes, stews and casseroles.
- Have extra salad on your sandwich or fresh vegetable soup as a side
- Fruit makes a perfectly portioned snack between meals
- Add fruit to your breakfast, e.g. chopped banana or berries with your cereal

Wholegrain starchy foods

Foods such as bread, crackers, rice, pasta, breakfast cereals, potatoes, couscous, noodles are important to provide the body with sufficient energy. Aiming for wholegrain varieties will help balance blood sugars and prevent development of conditions such as gestational diabetes. This is also important for healthy digestion due to their high fibre content. Aim to eat 6 portions of starchy carbohydrate food each day, or up to 8 if you are active

- One portion is equal to: 1 slice of bread; 4 dessertspoons flake type breakfast cereal; 3 dessertspoons dry porridge oats or muesli; 2 wheat or oat cereal biscuits; 2 small scoops mashed potato or 2 small potatoes or 1 medium baked potato; ½ cup (3 dessertspoons) of cooked rice, pasta or noodles.
- Other choices like 1 pitta pocket, 1 tortilla wrap, 1 small bagel, 1 small scone and 1 small bread roll count as 2 portions

Dairy products

These foods are rich in **calcium** which is needed to help control your blood pressure and for your baby's bone development and muscle function.

- Aim for at least 3 portions per day, e.g. 125g pot of yogurt (plain or natural types are best); 300ml or 1/3 pint of milk; 1 matchbox size of cheese
- If you are under 18 or you are carrying twins or more, aim for at least 5 portions daily
- If you are overweight, choose low-fat varieties – these contain the same amount of calcium as full-fat varieties
- If you do not like dairy foods, choose dairy alternatives that have calcium and vitamin B₁₂, added e.g. fortified rice milk, nut milk or soya milk and yogurts. Check the label for added vitamins and minerals

Protein

These foods for growth and development of cells in growing foetus and mother. Protein also helps us stay fuller for longer and therefore should be included at every meal is possible. It can be found in many foods including meat, fish, chicken, eggs, beans, dairy and tofu. Here are some tips on how to increase your intake

- Try to include red meat 3 times a week as it is a rich source of iron which is needed for healthy blood development and will help prevent anaemia in pregnancy. Chicken and fish also contain iron in smaller amounts. Lentils, eggs, leafy greens and beans contain a different type of iron which is not as easy for your body to absorb, but is still useful, especially if you are vegetarian.
- Aim for oily fish twice a week as possible as this is an excellent source of Omega 3 (see below)
- Beans, peas and lentils are great vegetable protein sources and fibre source and can be included in dishes as a healthy alternative to meat as.
- Choose lean meat and poultry, and trim off extra fat.
- Cook meat and chicken through to kill harmful bacteria.

- Avoid high-fat, high salt, processed meats like sausages, burgers, chicken nuggets, salami, and corned beef.
- Boil, bake or grill meat and fish and boil, poach or scramble eggs rather than frying
- Avoid soft boiled or very runny eggs. Cook eggs until the yolk is solid to ensure all bacteria are killed.

Limit fatty or sugary foods and drinks

These foods are high in calories and low in nutrients, and can lead to excess weight gain which is unhealthy for both you and your baby.

- Cut down on biscuits, cakes, muffins, chocolate, sweets and crisps. Think of them as portioned treats to have 3 times a week or so.
- Avoid deep-fried food and keep take-aways or fast food to maximum once a week.
- Use small amounts of oil in cooking, or use spray oils when frying.
- Avoid adding extra sugar to tea, coffee and cereals.
- Drink water for thirst. Limit fruit juice to 1 small glass per day and avoid fizzy drinks.

Important Nutrients for Pregnancy

Folic acid

To help prevent neural tube defects (NTD) like spina bifida you should take a 400µg folic acid supplement daily before stopping contraception and up to the 12th week of pregnancy to help the development of your baby's brain and spinal cord.

- You should also include folate-rich foods (green vegetables, fortified bread and cereals) in your diet.
- If you have diabetes, had a previous NTD-affected pregnancy, take medicine for epilepsy or are obese you should speak to your doctor about taking a higher dose of folic acid before stopping contraception and up to the 12th week of pregnancy.

Omega 3

Omega 3 in particular 'DHA', is an important polyunsaturated fat particularly in pregnancy. It has been found to play an important role in a baby's brain and eye development. Foods that contain Omega 3 are also good dietary source of vitamin D, protein and iron are therefore are very nutritious foods. Sources include:

- The best source is oily fish such as salmon, mackerel, trout, sardine or kippers. Ideally aim for at least 2 portions a week or more if possible.
- If you don't eat fish at all, you can include fortified milk, eggs and flaxseed (linseed). You could also commence a supplement by speaking to your local health food shop or pharmacy.

Vitamin D and Calcium

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Vitamin D is an important nutrient for many different systems in the body including the immune system, cardiovascular system and brain function. It is well known for its importance in bone health as it increases calcium absorption in the body to increase bone mineralisation. Calcium and Vitamin D requirements are increased during pregnancy to ensure there is sufficient quantities for healthy bone formation in the mother and for the foetus as well. If serum levels in the mother are insufficient, the body will start to increase bone resorption rates to release calcium from the bones, to ensure the foetus is protected. However, in doing so, this leaves the mother at greater risk of brittle bones and Osteoporosis.

To prevent this ,women should aim for 1200mg of calcium per day. Good sources include:

- Dairy products and fortified non-dairy alternatives
- Tinned fish
- Soy products and tofu
- Leafy green vegetables
- White and wholemeal bread

While Vitamin D can be attained in some animal products such as eggs diary and fish, it is advised all pregnant and breastfeeding women to consume a daily vitamin D supplement with 10µg.

Iron

We need iron to carry oxygen in red blood cells to all parts of our body. The main sources of high quality iron are meat, poultry, and fish. Another type of iron is present in eggs, beans, chickpeas, lentils dark green leafy vegetables and fortified breakfast cereals. Eating fruit or vegetables rich in Vitamin C at the same time as these foods will boost iron absorption. For example, add berries to breakfast cereal or tomatoes to an egg sandwich.

Some women may become anaemic (low blood count) during pregnancy. This can be caused by many things, and is more common towards the end of pregnancy. If your midwife or doctor tells you your iron is low, (also known as low haemoglobin or anaemia) make sure that you are including iron rich foods in your daily diet. In some cases you may need to take an iron supplement to help prevent or treat anaemia in pregnancy. Your doctor or midwife will guide you on the best supplement to take. A pregnancy multivitamin contains a small amount of iron and may help prevent low iron in pregnancy but it would not be enough to treat a low level.

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