



Eating well in pregnancy



Eating a balanced diet during pregnancy can help to protect the health of you and your baby. It's also a good idea to eat healthily if you're trying for a baby because a healthy pregnancy starts well before conception.

Folic Acid

Take at least 400 micrograms of folic acid a day while you're trying to get pregnant, and during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy. Folic acid reduces the risk of your baby having a neural tube defect, such as spina bifida. A neural tube defect is when the baby's spinal cord (part of the body's nervous system) doesn't form normally.

Folic acid tablets are widely available from pharmacies, or you can talk to your GP about getting a prescription.

Don't worry if you get pregnant unexpectedly and weren't taking folic acid supplements. Start taking them as soon as you find out, until you're past the first 12 weeks of pregnancy.

- **Do** take your folic acid supplement every day.
- **Do** eat plenty of food rich in folate (the natural form of folic acid), such as green leafy vegetables, including spinach and watercress, nuts, pulses, wholegrains and fruit juice. Fortified cereals also contain folic acid.

Iron

In normal pregnancy the recommended iron intake is 3.5mgs rising slightly in the last trimester to 6-7mgs a day. Iron supplementation is not routinely required for all pregnant women as it does not benefit the mother's or babies health and may have some unpleasant side effects (NICE, 2008). A diet rich in iron is sufficient unless your iron level runs low. Your health care provider will monitor your iron levels during the pregnancy and if needed iron supplements will be recommended.

Dried fruits such as apricots are great sources of iron, and they're easy to snack on. Other good sources for pregnant women include spinach, pumpkin, collards, kale and turnips. Beans such as green peas, lentils

and chick-peas are also good sources of iron.

Fruits and vegetables have nonheme iron, which while good, is a little harder for the body to absorb. It's very important that you take these iron-rich foods with iron helpers (see below) so your body absorbs the iron rather than flushing it away.

If you're getting your iron from meat sources, there are some things to keep in mind. Make sure you're cooking red meat to well done and microwaving any deli meat to steaming to prevent listeriosis (a bacteria that can affect the baby). Poultry needs to be cooked well and you should watch out for any contamination of raw poultry and other foods that you eat.

If you're a vegetarian or vegan, speak to your care provider about ways to add iron to diet.

Increase Vitamin C (Helper) Intake

It's not enough to just increase the amount of iron you eat; you also need vitamins that will help you absorb the iron. Vitamin C is a great "helper" in iron absorption. Try drinking a glass of orange juice as you eat foods high in iron. If you can't stomach that, add a side of brightly colored vegetables such as tomatoes or peppers to your plate.

Watch out for These Foods

Some foods actually decrease your absorption of iron and shouldn't be taken with iron-rich foods. Calcium and caffeine both decrease the absorption of iron. So foods such as teas, milks and coffees should be avoided while eating iron-rich foods. While you shouldn't cut milk out of your diet (pregnant women need the calcium), a better solution is to drink the milk between meals so your body has a chance to absorb the iron from your meals.

Vitamin D

It is important to ensure that you maintain adequate Vitamin D stores during pregnancy. Vitamin D promotes bone growth in the baby's first year of life and decreases the risk of developing rickets. In order to achieve this woman may choose to take 10 mcgs supplement of Vitamin D per day, or ensure a good supply of Vitamin D as part of a well balanced diet. Foods rich in Vitamin D include eggs, meat, Vitamin D fortified margarine, milk and breakfast cereal.

And:

- **Don't** take supplements that contain vitamin A, because too much vitamin A can cause foetal abnormalities.
- **Don't** eat liver or products that contain it, such as paté. Liver contains a lot of vitamin A.

Alcohol

When you drink, alcohol reaches your baby through the placenta. Too much exposure to alcohol can seriously affect your baby's development. If you're trying to conceive, or are already pregnant, it is advised that you should avoid drinking alcohol.

Getting pregnant may be more difficult if you drink. It's known that drinking heavily throughout

pregnancy can result in Foetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS). Children with this syndrome have restricted growth, facial abnormalities and learning and behavioural disorders. When a woman drinks while pregnant, the alcohol passes into the baby's bloodstream.

The safest approach is to not drink at all.

Caffeine

You don't need to cut out caffeine completely, but don't have more than 200mg a day as high levels can result in babies having a low birth weight, which can increase the risk of health problems in later life. Too much caffeine can also cause miscarriage. There's caffeine in chocolate, cola and 'energy' drinks, as well as tea and coffee.

The amount of caffeine in foods and drinks will vary, but each of the following contains roughly 200mg of caffeine or less:

- Two mugs of tea (75mg each).
- Two mugs of instant coffee (100mg each).
- One mug of filter coffee (140mg each).
- Five cans of cola (around 40mg each).
- Two cans of 'energy' drink (around 80mg each).
- Four 50g bars of dark chocolate (around 50g of caffeine each). Milk chocolate contains around half as much caffeine as dark chocolate.

Try to have less than 200mg of caffeine a day during the rest of your pregnancy.

Eat safely

Bacterial infections such as listeriosis, salmonella and toxoplasmosis can be dangerous for pregnant women and their unborn babies. The bacteria can harm the unborn baby and interfere with its normal development. Taking the following the steps can help you to avoid harmful bacteria:

- **Do** cook eggs thoroughly until the whites and yolks are solid. Avoid any foods that contain raw or lightly cooked eggs, such as home-made mayonnaise, sauces and puddings.
- **Do** make sure that all meats are cooked thoroughly. This is especially important with poultry (such as chicken and turkey) and food made from minced meat (such as burgers and sausages). Make sure that they're very hot all the way through, and there's no trace of blood or pink meat. Treat all meat at barbecues with caution.
- **Do** wash your hands, utensils and work surfaces after handling raw meat. It may contain bacteria, which can cause food poisoning.
- **Do** wash fruit, vegetables and salads to remove all traces of soil.
- **Do** heat ready meals until they're very hot all the way through. This is especially important for meals that contain poultry.

And:

- **Don't** eat mould-ripened soft cheese, such as brie and camembert, or blue cheese, such as Stilton or Danish blue. You can eat hard cheeses (e.g. cheddar, parmesan), cottage cheese, mozzarella, and processed cheese (such as cheese spread).
- **Don't** eat any kind of paté, including vegetable paté, because it can contain listeria.
- **Don't** eat liver or liver products, such as liver paté or liver sausage, as this is a very rich source of vitamin A (which can harm your unborn baby).

- **Don't** eat more than two portions of oily fish a week (for example, mackerel, trout or fresh tuna), or more than four cans of tuna (around 140g per can). These contain high levels of mercury, which can harm your baby's developing nervous system.
- **Don't** eat marlin, shark or swordfish. These can contain high levels of mercury, which can damage your baby's developing nervous system.
- **Don't** eat raw shellfish, as they can contain bacteria and viruses that can cause food poisoning.

Balanced diet

A well-balanced diet will supply all the energy and nutrients needed by you and your growing baby.

- **Do** eat plenty of fruit and vegetables (fresh, frozen, tinned, dried or juice); at least five portions a day.
- **Do** eat plenty of foods from the starchy carbohydrate group, such as breads, cereals, rice, pasta, noodles, maize, millet, yams and potatoes. Choose wholegrain versions whenever you can.
- **Do** have milk and other dairy products (e.g. yoghurt, hard cheese) to ensure that you have a good intake of calcium. Use low-fat varieties where you can. For example, semi-skimmed or skimmed milk, low-fat yoghurt and reduced-fat hard cheese.
- **Do** get enough vitamin D. It keeps bones healthy and provides your baby with enough vitamin D for the first few months of life. Take a 10-microgram supplement of vitamin D each day. Your body makes vitamin D from exposure to sunlight, but the amount of time you need in the sun to make enough vitamin varies from person to person. If you have dark skin or always cover your skin, you may be at particular risk of vitamin D deficiency. Talk to your midwife or doctor if you're worried about this.
- **Do** get plenty of iron because some women can develop low iron levels during pregnancy. Iron is found in meat, green leafy vegetables (such as spinach and watercress), pulses, bread and fortified cereals. Your midwife can advise you whether you need to take an iron supplement.
- **Do** eat protein foods, such as meat, fish, poultry, eggs, beans, soya, pulses and nuts (see below for information on peanuts). Have a good variety to ensure that you get enough protein and important nutrients, such as iron, zinc, magnesium and essential fatty acids. Fatty acids include omega 3 fats (found in flaxseed oil, rapeseed oil, and oily fish, such as mackerel and sardines).
- **Do** stay active and move around.
- **Don't** eat for two. You don't need extra calories until the final three months, when you need around 200 extra calories a day (equivalent to two slices of toast with margarine or butter). Be guided by your appetite. When you feel hungry between meals, choose a healthy snack such as fruit, yoghurt or a bowl of cereal.

Nuts

If you want to eat peanuts or foods containing peanuts (such as peanut butter) during pregnancy, you can do so as part of a healthy balanced diet, unless you're allergic to them or your health professional advises you not to.

If you have any queries, talk to your GP or midwife

References:

National Institute for Clinical Excellence. (2008) Antenatal care: routine care for healthy pregnant woman. NICE:London