

# Nutrition for Pregnancy

There is never a better time to start improving your eating habits than when you are planning a pregnancy or are pregnant. This fact sheet provides you with information on nutrition for you and your baby as well as safe foods and food hygiene practices for when you are pregnant.

## Healthy eating during pregnancy

It is important for women who are pregnant to eat a balanced diet. This will help your baby to grow strong and healthy. When pregnant, you need to meet your own nutritional needs and also those of your baby but you **do not** need to 'eat for two'. The types of food you eat are much more important than the amount of food that you eat. In fact, when you are pregnant your need for energy (calories/kilojoules) is only slightly higher than normal. Calcium, iron and folate are examples of nutrients which are extremely important during pregnancy.

Choose a wide variety of foods everyday to ensure you meet your and your baby's nutrition needs. Try to:

- > eat plenty of vegetables, wholegrain breads and cereals, legumes (including dried beans and peas) and fruit and choose foods low in saturated fat, salt and sugar
- > include lean meat, fish, poultry and /or alternatives such as eggs, legumes and nuts
- > include Low or reduced fat milks, yoghurts, cheeses and /or alternatives (eg. calcium fortified soy products such as soy milk and soy cheese)
- > drink plenty of water.

## Key nutrients during pregnancy

### Folate

It has been shown that extra folate in the early stages of pregnancy can reduce the chance of having a baby with a neural tube defect such as spina bifida which occurs when the spinal cord and brain are forming.

Folate is a vitamin that is found mostly in green vegetables, wholegrain breads and cereals, dried beans and nuts. Some foods such as bread, breakfast cereals and juices may have folate added to them. However, even if you eat foods naturally rich in folate as well as foods with added folate, it is still difficult to get the extra folate needed during early pregnancy. So it is recommended you take a 0.5 milligrams (mg) folate (folic acid) tablet, for at least ONE MONTH BEFORE pregnancy and during the FIRST THREE MONTHS of pregnancy or a pregnancy specific supplement that contains this amount of folate.

Some women may be at a higher risk of having a baby with a neural tube defect and will be recommended a higher dose of folate. Check with your doctor if you are uncertain.

### Calcium

Calcium is important during pregnancy to help your baby build strong, healthy bones and teeth. It also helps to keep your bones strong.

Dairy foods such as milk, yoghurt and cheese or calcium fortified dairy alternatives are excellent sources of calcium. They also contain protein, riboflavin and vitamin B12. You should aim to include around 3 serves of dairy or alternatives each day. If you are under 18 years of age, you will need to eat even more dairy as your bones are still developing, so aim for 3-4 serves each day.

## Iron

Extra iron is needed when you are pregnant. Iron is needed for making blood and carrying oxygen around the body. Even from early pregnancy you have more blood in your body for you and the baby, so you need more iron. If you don't eat enough iron you may become anaemic.

Red meat is the best source of iron, aim to include 3-4 times per week. Iron can also be found in chicken and fish, wholemeal/wholegrain breads and cereals, beans and leafy vegetables. The iron in animal foods (red meat, chicken, and fish) is more easily absorbed by your body than iron in plant foods.

## Iodine

Iodine is important for the normal development of your baby's brain and nervous system. Extra iodine is needed in pregnancy and it can be quite difficult to get enough iodine through food alone. Food sources of iodine include bread, dairy foods, eggs, iodised salt, canned salmon and seaweed. If you are not consuming bread, fish and 3 serves of dairy most days, it is unlikely you are getting enough iodine.

It is recommended that all women, who are pregnant, breastfeeding or considering pregnancy, take an iodine supplement of 150 micrograms ( $\mu\text{g}$ ) each day or a pregnancy specific supplement that contains this amount of iodine.

Women with pre-existing thyroid conditions should seek advice from their doctor before taking an iodine supplement.



## Do I need to take a vitamin and mineral supplement?

Many women choose to take a pregnancy specific supplement during pregnancy. These supplements provide the extra folate and iodine required during pregnancy as well as additional amounts of other nutrients such as iron and calcium. Check with your doctor, pharmacist or dietitian before taking any other vitamin, mineral or herbal supplements. You can also contact the Medicines and Drug Information Centre at the Women's and Children's Hospital (WCH) if you have questions regarding supplements on (08) 8161 7222.

## Other important information for women during pregnancy

### How much weight should I gain?

Weight gain is a normal part of a healthy pregnancy. How much weight you gain depends on several things, including your weight before pregnancy. Most women can expect to gain between 11.5–16 kg. Those who start underweight may gain more; those who are overweight may gain less. If you are overweight, pregnancy is not a safe time for trying to lose weight. It is best to tackle this either before the pregnancy or as a long-term goal after your baby is born.

### Food safety during pregnancy

When you are pregnant, hormonal changes lower your immunity, so you and your baby are at higher risk of food-related illnesses and infections. If you have any concerns about symptoms or illness please consult your doctor.

By following the food safety recommendations below, you can help prevent food-related illnesses and infections such as toxoplasmosis, salmonella and listeriosis.

- > Listeriosis is a rare but serious illness caused by the bacterium *Listeria*. It causes few or no symptoms to the mother but can be transferred to your baby and can lead to miscarriage, still birth, premature birth or may make a newborn very ill. You can reduce the risk of listeriosis by taking simple food hygiene steps at home and avoiding certain high risk foods.

## General Food Safety Guidelines

- > Wash hands and food utensils (knives and cutting board) before and after handling or preparing any food.
- > Store uncooked meats separate from vegetables, cooked foods and ready-to-eat foods. Store meats below other foods so there is no chance it will drip onto other foods.
- > Always thaw ready-to-eat frozen food in the fridge or microwave. Don't thaw on the bench at room temperature.
- > Avoid foods past their 'best before' or 'use by' date.
- > Make sure ready-to-eat hot food is served steaming hot and keep cold food cold.
- > Avoid raw meat, poultry, fish, and undercooked eggs (includes raw egg mayonnaise and some ice creams). Ensure these are cooked thoroughly.
- > Avoid uncooked sprouts (e.g. alfalfa, snow pea sprouts etc.).
- > Eat only freshly cooked food, however if leftovers are stored promptly they can be eaten within a day. Cover and cool in the fridge, not on the bench.



The table below indicates which foods are high risk and gives safer choices.

Food type example	Foods to avoid	Safer choices
<b>Cold meats/cooked chicken</b>	Sliced processed meats (e.g. ham, salami) or take away cooked diced chicken.	Home cooked meat stored in the fridge and eaten the next day.
<b>Salads (fruit and vegetables)</b>	Pre-prepared salads and/or ready-to-eat food from supermarkets, smorgasbords, delicatessens and sandwich/sushi bars.	Freshly made salads with well washed vegetables. Washed whole fruit or freshly made fruit salad.
<b>Chilled seafood</b>	Raw seafood eg. oysters and sashimi. Ready to eat peeled prawns. Smoked seafood (e.g. smoked salmon and oysters).	Well cooked seafood including shellfish. Canned oysters, canned salmon.
<b>Cheese or Pate</b>	Soft cheese such as Brie, Camembert, Ricotta, Feta and Blue Cheese. Refrigerated pate or meat spreads.	Soft cheese cooked in dishes and served hot (e.g. ricotta cannelloni). Hard cheeses. Cottage cheese, cream cheese (look for intact packaging and use within 4 days of opening).
<b>Ice cream</b>	Soft serve. Traditional ice-cream containing raw egg yolk.	Regular ice-cream or sorbets.
<b>Other dairy products</b>	Unpasteurised milk (e.g. raw goats milk).	Pasteurised milk.

For more information visit [www.foodstandards.gov.au](http://www.foodstandards.gov.au)

## What do I need to know about mercury in fish?

It is recommended you eat fish as part of a healthy diet during pregnancy. Fish offers many benefits to both yourself and the growth and development of your baby. Mercury, a naturally occurring heavy metal found in our environment, can build up in some types of fish. Pregnant women need to be careful of the types and amounts of fish they eat as their baby is more at risk to the effects of mercury.

**Following these guidelines will ensure that you and your baby do not get too much mercury.**

If you are pregnant or planning a pregnancy, you can eat up to (\*1 serve of fish = 150g portion):

- > 2–3 serves\* of any fish or seafood per week not listed below, or
- > 1 serve of sea perch/orange roughy or catfish per week and no other fish consumed that week, or
- > 1 serve per fortnight of shark (flake) or swordfish/ broadbill/ marlin and no other fish consumed that fortnight.

## Can I drink alcohol while I am pregnant?

If you are pregnant, no alcohol at all is the safest choice. There is no safe time to drink during pregnancy as alcohol can harm your baby for life.

For women in South Australia seeking support to stop drinking, contact the Alcohol and Drug Information Service (24-hour counselling) 1300 131 340.

## How much caffeine can I have?

Tea, coffee and cola drinks contain caffeine. Large amounts of caffeine may increase the risk of miscarriage or having a baby with a low birth weight. Over a 24-hour period it is best to drink no more than:

- > a single shot of espresso coffee (e.g. small latte or equivalent), or 3 cups of instant style coffee,
- > 4 cups of tea, or
- > 4 cans (375ml) cola drinks.

Energy drinks are not recommended during pregnancy as they may contain high levels of caffeine.

## If I am having twins or triplets, do I have to eat more food?

If you are pregnant with twins or triplets, you need more calcium, protein, iron and folate than mothers having a single baby. The quality of your diet is even more important to make sure you meet the needs of both yourself and your babies.

## Other nutrition concerns during pregnancy

Morning sickness, constipation, and indigestion are all conditions that can occur in pregnancy. These conditions can cause unpleasant symptoms for some women. If you are experiencing symptoms from any of these conditions see the more information section below.

**See your doctor if you have severe, constant vomiting.**

## More information

For more information on any of the topics covered in this fact sheet, download the

**Nutrition for Pregnancy and Breastfeeding Booklet** at

[http://www.wch.sa.gov.au/services/az/other/nutrition/documents/Nutrition\\_for\\_Pregnancy\\_and\\_Breastfeeding.pdf](http://www.wch.sa.gov.au/services/az/other/nutrition/documents/Nutrition_for_Pregnancy_and_Breastfeeding.pdf) or via the QR Code



*Food product information contained in this resource was up to date at the time of revision.*

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