

# O&G

Complete Women's Health



## Nutrition & Food Safety in Pregnancy

### The aims of healthy eating in pregnancy:

»» Meet your increased nutrient needs

»» Promote the health of yourself and your baby

»» Achieve a healthy weight gain.

What you eat during pregnancy affects your developing baby, your own health and wellbeing, and can affect your baby's health later in life.

Although pregnancy increases the need for many nutrients, this doesn't mean that you have to 'eat for two'. It is the quality of what you eat that is important, not the quantity.

It's not difficult to meet you and your baby's nutritional needs if you eat regular meals containing a variety of foods from the five food groups.

You may need more calories during pregnancy to meet the added needs of your growing baby. This varies depending on your weight and activity level but on average is equivalent to an extra snack each day.

#### Important Nutrients During Pregnancy

**Protein** - Protein requirements are higher during pregnancy. Most women in Australia eat generous amounts of protein so don't need to increase their intake if they are eating meat and dairy (or their alternatives) regularly.

**Folic Acid** - (also called folate) is essential for blood formation and for the building of body cells. It is especially important around the time of conception and in the first trimester to help prevent some types of birth defects. It is difficult to get enough folic acid from food alone; start a daily supplement of 400 micrograms (mcg or µg) when planning a pregnancy and continue it for the first three months of your pregnancy.

Folate is important throughout pregnancy for the normal development of your baby so eat foods rich in folate such as; green leafy vegetables, salad greens, fruit, wholegrain breads and cereals, fortified breakfast cereals, legumes and nuts.



**Iron** - During pregnancy your blood volume increases and the baby's blood tissue is also being formed, so your requirement for iron increases. Lack of iron can lead to low iron stores, tiredness and eventually anaemia. Iron is found in lean meat and meat alternatives (see *Healthy Foods Guide*) as well as whole grains and green vegetables.

If tests have shown you are low in iron you may be prescribed an iron supplement as it is difficult to get enough iron from food alone once your iron stores are depleted during pregnancy.

**Calcium** - is important during pregnancy and breastfeeding for the formation of your baby's bones. During pregnancy your body absorbs calcium from food more efficiently to help meet your baby's needs. The best sources of calcium are dairy foods. Fish with edible bones, such as canned salmon and sardines, are also a good source. There are small amounts of calcium in other foods, but on average about three-quarters of our calcium comes from dairy foods. If you drink soy or other milks, such as almond or rice milk, check the label and choose a brand with the same amount of calcium as cow's milk (at least 100 mg per 100 ml). Low fat dairy foods are not lower in calcium than the full fat versions.

**Vitamin D** - Helps the body absorb and use calcium. It is mostly made in the skin by the action of sunlight, but a small amount comes from food (oily fish, egg yolks, margarine, vitamin D-fortified milk). If you have darker skin, cover most of your body in clothing or spend most of your time indoors, you are at risk of vitamin D deficiency.



Vitamin D deficiency can cause bone weakness and muscle pain in women and if severe, skeletal abnormalities (called rickets) in their babies. If you are at risk have your vitamin D levels checked. If low, you will be prescribed a vitamin D supplement.

**Vitamin B12** - is needed for blood cell, nerve and the brain development of the baby. Pregnancy and breastfeeding can rapidly deplete body stores. Women at risk should have their level checked and may need to take a supplement. If you are concerned please discuss this with your dietitian or doctor.

As this vitamin is naturally present only in foods of animal origin, vegans and vegetarians who eat few dairy foods or eggs are particularly at risk of vitamin B12 deficiency. Certain brands of soy milk and meat substitutes have added-B12 but the amount may not be enough if few other sources of B12 are eaten.

**Multivitamin Supplement** - Ideally the best way to meet the increased nutrient requirements of pregnancy is with a balanced diet, however if you are unable to eat well, a pregnancy multivitamin supplement can be beneficial.

A multivitamin supplement can also be a convenient way of getting enough folic acid and iodine if you are not taking these supplements.

Check that any supplements you are taking are suitable for pregnancy. Ask your pharmacist, doctor or dietitian for advice.

...And remember to keep those fluids up – at least 2 -3 litres of fluids per day!

## Food Safety in Pregnancy

### Caffeine containing drinks

Tea, coffee and cola drinks all contain caffeine. There is mixed evidence about the effects of large amounts of caffeine on the developing baby; however moderate amounts appear safe i.e. up to 3 cups of coffee or 5 cups tea or cola drinks. Don't forget cola drinks also contain large quantities of sugar. Some energy drinks can also contain large amounts of caffeine or guarana (a plant that contains caffeine and caffeine-like substances) and are not recommended for pregnant women.

### Alcohol

The evidence linking alcohol with birth defects is still inconclusive. We know that heavy drinking may be harmful to the baby, particularly during the early stages of pregnancy; however the effect of low to moderate alcohol intake is less clear. Some studies show no effects while others show that even this amount may be harmful. The best advice is to avoid alcohol if possible.

### Things to look out for, limit or avoid during pregnancy

### Preventing food related illnesses

The risk of contracting all types of food borne illnesses during pregnancy can be reduced by good food handling practices. These include washing hands before preparing food, ensuring foods are fresh and refrigerated and avoiding cross contamination of raw and cooked foods.

### Toxoplasmosis

Toxoplasmosis is another infection that can affect unborn babies. To reduce the risk meat should be thoroughly cooked and salad vegetables thoroughly washed. Pregnant women should avoid contact with cat faeces and should wear disposable gloves if handling cat litter. Hands should be washed after gardening or handling pets.

### Listeria

Listeria is a bacterium that can contaminate food and cause infection. In pregnant women this infection can be passed on to the baby. Listeria infection is not a common problem and the risk can be minimized by good food handling practices.

Here are some suggestions to help minimise your risk of listeria infection:

- Ensure good hygiene and clean utensils when preparing food.
- Thoroughly wash raw vegetables.
- Avoid foods such as pate, cold cooked chicken and sliced meats, coleslaws and salads (unless you are sure they have been freshly prepared), unpasteurised dairy products, soft cheeses e.g. brie, camembert, ricotta, feta, blue cheese) soft serve ice-cream, uncooked or smoked seafood and precooked prawns. Freshly cooked seafood is safe.
- Listeria is killed by cooking food to boiling point, so when reheating foods, make sure they are piping hot.