

# Eating Well when Breastfeeding

## When following a vegan eating style

### For you and your baby

There is not enough evidence to say if a vegan diet is safe or unsafe during pregnancy, breastfeeding and for babies and children. What we do know is that the nutrition needs are very high during these times. To meet those needs you will need to carefully plan your diet and take certain nutrition supplements. If nutrition needs are not met over time, these deficiencies can lead to serious health problems. This can affect your child for life. Choosing to follow a vegan diet during these times is an important decision. Discuss this with your doctor, child health nurse or Accredited Practising Dietitian so that you can get the help you need.

When breastfeeding, your energy and nutrition needs are higher. Some extra planning is needed when you eat a vegan diet to help you meet your nutritional needs for breastfeeding. This is important to support both your baby's growth and development and your health. Special attention needs to be paid to key nutrients.

If you are offering a vegan diet to your baby, your breast milk is an important source of nutrition. It is recommended you breastfeed your baby for their first two years.

### Plan what you eat to meet your needs

#### Include a wide variety of plant foods

This will make it easier to meet your needs. Nutrient rich foods include lentils and legumes, tofu, plant-based meat alternatives, wholegrain cereals like oats, barley and breads, vegetables, fruits and plant-based milks (with added calcium and vitamin B12).

#### Include healthy fats

Examples of these include ground flaxseed (linseed) and flaxseed oil, chia seed, hemp seeds and walnuts.

#### Include sources of key nutrients calcium, iron and vitamin B12

Choose plant-based milk (with added calcium and vitamin B12). You need to eat foods with a source of vitamin B12 every day.

### Supplements are needed

Some foods have key nutrients added (eg vitamin B12) but these may not be enough to meet your needs. Check with your doctor, midwife, pharmacist or an Accredited Practising Dietitian for supplement advice that meets your needs for vitamin B12, iodine and vitamin D while breastfeeding.

## Extra protein foods are needed

The best sources of protein-rich plant foods are soy foods (eg tofu, soy milk) and legumes (eg beans, lentils, chickpeas). Other protein containing foods include grains (eg rice, pasta, bread), nuts and seeds and green leafy vegetables (eg broccoli, spinach, brussel sprouts). Soy foods, buckwheat, quinoa, amaranth, lupins and spinach have proteins that are very similar to proteins found in animal foods. Having a wide range of protein-rich plant foods at each meal and snack helps you meet your needs.

## Healthy fats

Healthy fats like omega-3 fats are important for your baby's brain, nerve and eye development. Essential fatty acid requirements increase when breastfeeding. Although your body can make essential fatty acids from other fats, it may not be able to meet your extra needs while breastfeeding.

Good plant sources of omega-3 fats include ground flaxseed (linseed) and flaxseed oil, chia seed, hemp seeds and walnuts.

Other healthy fats and oils include avocado, olive oil and canola oil.

## Iodine

Iodine is an important nutrient for the growth and brain development of your baby. You need more iodine than usual when breastfeeding. It is hard to get enough from food alone. While breastfeeding, take a supplement with 150 micrograms of iodine daily. If you have coeliac disease or a thyroid condition talk to your doctor or pharmacist about the dosage.

## Vitamin B12

Vitamin B12 is important for your baby's brain and nervous system. Vitamin B12 is only found naturally in animal foods. Some foods, such as some plant-based milks, have vitamin B12 added.

When breastfeeding, you will need to take a vitamin B12 supplement (not a multivitamin including vitamin B12). This is the most reliable way to make sure that you are getting enough vitamin B12.

## Vitamin D and calcium

Vitamin D is made by your body in the skin through exposure to sunlight. If your skin is

often covered up or you spend a lot of time indoors you may need to consider taking a vitamin D supplement.

Vitamin D is also needed for bone health and it helps the body absorb calcium. Your calcium needs are the same as before pregnancy.

Plant foods rich in calcium include most green leafy vegetables such as broccoli, brussel sprouts, kale, bok choy and other greens, sesame seeds, almonds, soy tempeh, tofu and dried figs.

Other good sources of calcium include foods and drinks that have calcium added (eg some plant-based milks with more than 100mg of calcium per 100g).

## Iron

During breastfeeding your iron requirements return to normal.

Whole grains, legumes, tofu, nuts and seeds are good sources of iron. Vitamin C helps the body absorb iron. Include foods rich in vitamin C such as oranges, tomatoes, capsicum and berries with iron containing foods to increase the absorption.

## Drink plenty of water

When you are breastfeeding, you need more fluid than usual. Drink a glass of water each time you breastfeed.

**Tip:** Place a water bottle next to you when you sit down to breastfeed.

## Caffeine

Caffeine is a mild stimulant, found in coffee, tea, chocolate, energy and cola drinks. Try not having too much caffeine when you are breastfeeding. Limit to 200 milligrams (mg) from all food and drink sources of caffeine each day.

This is about the same as:

- two cups of instant coffee **or** one espresso coffee **or** one cold coffee based milk drink **or**
- four cups of tea **or**
- two small cola drinks.

Energy drinks contain high amounts of caffeine and are not recommended while breastfeeding. If you are unsure about whether a product contains caffeine, or how much caffeine it contains, read the food label.

## **Alcohol**

No amount of alcohol is safe. If you choose to drink alcohol, there are risks to both you and your baby's health and wellbeing. When you are breastfeeding, the safest option is not to drink alcohol but if you do, you need to plan. For information see the [Alcohol](#) handout.

## **Seek the help you need**

Please talk to your doctor, midwife or child health nurse about how you are eating and about what supplements to take. This is especially important if you are exclusively breastfeeding (your baby is only having breast milk) from birth to around six months.