

Eating Well for Pregnancy

When planning a pregnancy and when pregnant

Eat a variety of foods every day

It is important to eat well before and during pregnancy. A growing baby uses the body's stores of vitamins and minerals to grow. Eat foods from each of the five food groups every day to get the nutrition you and your baby need:

- vegetables – try to eat different types
- lean meats and meat alternatives (like eggs or legumes)
- grain foods like bread, pasta, and rice
- fruit
- dairy foods or dairy alternatives with added calcium (100 mg per 100 ml).

Expect that you will put on weight as your body changes to support the development of your baby. How your body changes is unique to you. Your body will need more food and certain nutrients are important. It is good to focus on eating a variety of food.

Eating difficulties

It is very common to experience some issues or discomfort with eating during pregnancy, especially in the early months. Sometimes this can affect how you are eating.

If you are having trouble with eating food or drinks during pregnancy, talk to your doctor or midwife about ways to help.

Folate

Folate is important for growth and development in the first few months of pregnancy. This is when a baby's brain and spine are forming.

Folate is found in foods like:

- vegetables such as broccoli, spinach and asparagus
- legumes like chickpeas, beans and lentils
- bread – in Australia, folic acid is added to most store bought breads.

It can be difficult to get enough folate from food. Take a folate supplement containing 500 micrograms of folic acid for the first three months of pregnancy. If you are planning a pregnancy, start a folate supplement at least one month before you become pregnant.

Iodine

Iodine is an important nutrient for the growth and brain development of your baby. During pregnancy and when breastfeeding, more iodine is needed than usual. Iodine is found in most bread, dairy milk and seafood (such as flathead, tuna and salmon, including tinned varieties). See next page for food safety and mercury advice. It is hard to get enough iodine from food alone.

When pregnant, and while breastfeeding, take a supplement with 150 micrograms of iodine daily. If you are planning a pregnancy, start taking an iodine supplement. If you have coeliac disease, a thyroid condition or are lactose intolerant talk to your doctor or pharmacist about the dosage.

Iron

Iron is a mineral that helps your body carry oxygen around in the blood. This gives you the energy to be active each day. Iron is also important for the healthy growth and brain development of baby.

Pregnant women need more iron than usual.

There are two types of iron:

- ‘Haem iron’ – found in animal foods and absorbed best by the body. Good sources include red meat, pork, chicken and fish.
- ‘Non-haem iron’ – found in plant foods and harder for the body to absorb. Good sources include legumes (beans and lentils), tofu, green leafy vegetables, breakfast cereals with added iron, nuts and seeds.

Including foods high in vitamin C (like citrus fruits, tomatoes, capsicum, broccoli and berries) helps the body absorb iron more easily. Eating a variety of iron rich foods together also helps with absorption.

If you follow a vegetarian or vegan style of eating, talk to your doctor or midwife about getting your iron levels checked. You may need a supplement.

Vitamin B12

Vitamin B12 is important for your baby’s brain and nervous system. It is only found in animal foods. If you do not eat animal foods like meat, fish, eggs, milk, or cheese you may not have enough vitamin B12 stored for your growing baby. If you follow a vegetarian or vegan eating style, talk to your doctor or midwife about getting your vitamin B12 levels checked. You may need to take a supplement.

Drink water

Most people need about eight cups of fluid a day. When you are pregnant you need more, especially in very hot weather.

Caffeine

Caffeine is a mild stimulant, found in coffee, tea, chocolate, energy and cola drinks. Too much caffeine can make it harder to fall pregnant. It may also increase your risk of complications during pregnancy. Try not having too much caffeine when you are planning a pregnancy or are pregnant. 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 coffee based cold milk drink **or**
- four cups of tea **or**
- two small cola drinks.

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

Alcohol

Alcohol can harm unborn babies. The safest option is not to drink alcohol while you are pregnant.

Food safety

During pregnancy, the immune system is weaker. Take extra care with food safety when you are pregnant. This is especially important in hot weather. Some harmful germs in food can make you and your unborn baby very sick. If you develop symptoms of food poisoning, get medical help straight away.

To lower your risk of food poisoning, eat freshly cooked and prepared food

Foods to avoid eating while pregnant:

- cold deli meats
- cold cooked ready-to-eat chicken
- pre-prepared or pre-packaged salads, including fruit salad
- chilled seafood such as oysters, sushi, smoked seafood and cooked ready-to-eat prawns
- soft or semi-soft cheeses such as brie, camembert, ricotta, blue or feta

- raw eggs or egg products (like mayonnaise)
- undercooked meat or poultry
- refrigerated pate or meat spreads
- hummus and tahini
- soft serve ice cream
- unpasteurised (raw) dairy foods.

Lower your risk of food poisoning by handling food safely

While pregnant:

- don't use foods past their 'use by' date
- put your leftovers in the fridge as soon as possible, and use them within 24 hours
- cook foods well
- re-heat foods until they are steaming hot.

Mercury

Mercury can affect the nervous system of unborn babies. It is found naturally in the environment. Most mercury we eat comes from fish. Fish contain different amounts. How much fish you can safely eat when pregnant depends on the type of fish.

When you are pregnant, choose either:

- flake (shark), swordfish or marlin - 150 gram serve once a fortnight
- orange roughy (deep sea perch) or catfish - 150 gram serve once a week
- other fish or seafood - 150 gram serve two or three times a week.

Want to know more

Please talk to your doctor, midwife or child health nurse about how you're eating, about what supplements to take and any nutrition issues you have for a healthy and safe pregnancy.