

Eating Well for Pregnancy - Vegan

For you and your baby

Pregnancy is a special time when your body's need for some nutrients is increased. What you eat is important for both your health and to support the growth of 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.

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, whole grain 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 a reliable source of vitamin B12.

Supplements are needed

Some foods have key nutrients added (e.g. 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 pregnancy needs for vitamin B12, iron, zinc, iodine, folate and vitamin D.

If you're not able to eat enough from a wide variety of foods (e.g. because of nausea or poor appetite) please speak to your doctor, midwife or an Accredited Practising Dietitian for advice.

Extra protein is needed

Protein is important for growth. Your body needs extra servings of protein-rich plant foods during the second and third trimester of pregnancy. The best sources of protein-rich plant foods are soy foods (e.g. tofu, soy milk) and legumes (e.g. beans, lentils, chickpeas). Grains (e.g. rice, pasta, bread), nuts and seeds and green leafy vegetables (e.g. broccoli, spinach, brussels sprouts) also contain some protein. 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 during pregnancy. Although your body can make essential fatty acids from other fats, it may not be able to meet your extra needs during pregnancy.

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.

Choose white cereals and grains

Too much fibre can get in the way of nutrients being absorbed. Vegan diets are often very high in fibre. Reducing the amount of fibre you eat in the last trimester can help ensure your body gets key nutrients. Simple swaps from whole grain bread to white can help you reduce fibre.

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.

During pregnancy, 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.

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.

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 or a thyroid condition talk to your doctor or pharmacist about the dosage.

Iron and zinc

Iron is needed for healthy blood cells and your baby's brain development. Zinc is also important for your baby's brain development. Your iron and zinc needs are higher during pregnancy.

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

Vitamin D and calcium

Vitamin D is made by your body in the skin through exposure to sunlight. If you have limited exposure to sunlight you may need to consider taking a vitamin D supplement.

Calcium is important for the growth of your baby and to maintain your bone density. Vitamin D is also needed for bone health and it helps the body absorb calcium.

Plant foods rich in calcium include most green leafy vegetables such as broccoli, brussels 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 (e.g. some plant-based milks with more than 100mg of calcium per 100g).

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 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 during pregnancy and 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:

- pre-prepared or pre-packaged salads, including fruit salad
- hummus and tahini
- bean sprouts including alfalfa sprouts, broccoli sprouts, onion sprouts, sunflower sprouts, clover sprouts, radish sprouts, snow pea sprouts, mung bean and soybean sprouts.

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
- reheat foods until they are steaming hot.

Want to know more

Please talk to your doctor or midwife about how you are eating and about what supplements to take for a health and safe pregnancy or any other nutrition issues you may have.