

Nutrition in Pregnancy

'Pregnancy' is one of the most commonly used health terms used in the Google search engine. While the internet provides an endless array of information, the quality of advice about nutrition in pregnancy is varied and confusing. The British Nutrition Foundation has launched a new section of their website www.nutrition4baby.co.uk to provide information about healthy diet and lifestyle for women (and their partners) who are planning a baby, who are pregnant, or have just had a baby. The website focuses on the role of nutrients in different stages of pregnancy.

Is there a need to 'eat for two' during pregnancy? Generally, the answer is 'No'. Some additional energy is needed to support aspects such as the development of new tissue for the foetus and placenta, and for the growth of the mother's tissues including the uterus and breasts. Much of this increased need for 'energy' is met by decreased energy expenditure and it is only in the third trimester that an additional energy intake of 200kcal per day is recommended.

Regarding protein intake, an additional 6g is recommended during pregnancy, giving a typical total daily requirement of around 50-55g. Protein is essential for building new cells and repairing existing ones. It is the building block of many of the body's hormones and enzymes. Good sources of protein include: meat, poultry, seafood, eggs, milk, dairy products and pulses. Raw shellfish should not be consumed during pregnancy and many people recommend avoidance of sushi. Larger fish such as shark, marlin and swordfish should also be avoided.

It's important to keep up a good intake of a range of vitamins during pregnancy, in particular vitamins A, B1, B2, folic acid, folate, vitamin C and D.

Vitamin A is found in whole milk, cheese, margarine and spreads, carrots, leafy vegetables and orange-coloured fruits. This vitamin allows the mother to obtain energy from food, and allows the baby to derive energy from the nutrients supplied by the mother.

Vitamins B1 and B2 can be found in wholegrain foods, rice (particularly brown rice), nuts, seeds, eggs, legumes, fortified cereals and to a lesser degree in fruits and vegetables. They too facilitate the transfer of energy from nutrients to mother and baby.

Women are advised to take daily supplements of 400 micrograms of folic acid (more if there is a high risk of a neural tube defect) when trying to conceive and during the first trimester. Research from the Southampton Women's Survey found that only 44% of pregnant women took folic acid supplements and of these, only 5.5% were taking the recommended amount. Folates and folic acid are also important for maintaining the mother's healthy red blood cells.

Vitamin C is found in fruits and vegetables such as: tomatoes, peppers, broccoli, cabbage, citrus fruits, melon and kiwi fruit. A lack of vitamin C can inhibit the uptake of iron from the diet. It helps to build a baby's tissues, for example the collagen that gives strength to skin.

Vitamin D and calcium work together in the body to help maintain strong bones and teeth. If the diet is healthy and balance, there isn't usually a need to additional calcium intake during pregnancy but it is important for women to eat enough calcium and they may have been advised by their GP to take vitamin D supplements. Vitamin D is found in oily fish, eggs,

margarines and spreads, fortified cereals. Calcium is abundant in milk and dairy products, canned fish and to a lesser degree in bread.

The omega-3 and omega-6 essential fatty acids are important for maintaining good circulatory health, and they are also the building blocks for a developing baby's nervous system and retina. Omega-3 fats are found in oily fish, walnuts, seeds and seed oils. Omega-6 fats are found in sunflower and olive oils and spreads.

Iron can be easily depleted during pregnancy. It is needed for building the baby's tissues and for developing and maintaining the placenta. The mother needs adequate iron to keep her blood healthy and to protect against anaemia. Dietary sources include: meat, beans, nuts, dried fruit, wholegrain foods, fortified cereals and dark green leafy vegetables.

In 2007 the Department of Health issued advice about alcohol consumption, recommending that both when trying to conceive and during pregnancy alcohol should be avoided completely. This is consistent with advice from Australia and the USA.

In 2008 the Food Standards Agency (FSA) issued revised recommendations regarding caffeine intake during pregnancy. Research suggests a link between caffeine intake and birth outcomes. Current FSA advice is to limit caffeine to a maximum of 200mg daily during pregnancy, i.e. about two mugs of instant coffee or 2.5 mugs of tea daily.

It is recommended that no more than two portions of oily fish should be eaten per week, e.g. salmon, fresh tuna, mackerel, trout and sardines.

There has been seemingly conflicting advice about eating peanuts during pregnancy and the recommendation now by the UK government is to avoid them if you have an allergy to them, or if you have been advised to do so by your health professional.

We wish you a happy and healthy pregnancy and hope this information will have helped you to make good dietary choices.

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