

Pregnancy NUTRITION

When you're pregnant, eating healthily and getting the right balance of nutrients is even more crucial.

Angie Jefferson explains what you can do to help maintain a healthy diet during pregnancy

Pregnancy is a time of great excitement, but many women also feel concerned about what they should, or should not be eating as they are now providing for the baby as well as themselves. For the most part a healthy balanced diet will meet all your pregnancy needs, but there are a few areas of your diet where special attention is worthwhile.

DON'T EAT FOR TWO!

Eating for two is an old wives' tale that will simply result in you putting on extra weight that may be hard to lose once baby has arrived. The body adapts to pregnancy and becomes more efficient so energy intakes don't particularly need to rise. While it's OK to allow yourself an occasional extra treat, after all pregnancy is quite hard work, don't let this get out of hand as putting on too much weight could harm both your own health and that of your baby.



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KEEP DIGESTION MOVING

A frequent side effect of pregnancy (which can start almost from the moment of conception), is a feeling of sluggish digestion and constipation. This is entirely normal and caused by changes in hormone levels. The speed at which food travels along the digestive tract slows down, so it's important that you take positive steps to help keep things moving smoothly. The combination of constipation and pregnancy are no fun and increases the chances of you developing piles (swellings containing large blood vessels found inside or around your bottom) so is definitely one to avoid.

The simplest dietary change to try is to eat foods that contain wheat bran every day. This is because wheat bran fibre is very effective at improving digestive wellbeing. Start the day with a breakfast cereal that is rich in wheat bran (look for the words ‘wheat bran’ on the pack or check the fibre content on the nutrition panel; more than 6g fibre per 100g is good). Switch over to wholemeal

bread, wraps or pitta breads at lunch. Dinner time can be more challenging, but wholemeal pasta is worth a try and make sure you include plenty of foods that are generally high in fibre such as vegetables, beans and pulses. Fluid helps bran to work, so every time you eat a wheat bran food, wash it down with a glass of water or sugar-free squash.

TAKE FOLIC ACID & VITAMIN D

The Department of Health advise all pregnant or breastfeeding women to take a daily supplement containing 400 micrograms of folic acid and 10 micrograms of vitamin D. Folic acid is most important during the first trimester of pregnancy as it can cut the risk of your baby developing neural tube defects (NTDs) such as spina bifida. Ideally you will have started your folic acid supplement before becoming pregnant, but if not, start taking one as soon as you suspect you may have conceived.

Vitamin D plays a wide range of roles in health. Although we can make this vitamin from

Good sources of folic acid include kale, spinach, broccoli, beans and pulses, yeast extracts and brown rice



sunlight, the reality is that in the UK this is limited to the summer months and we don't spend enough time outside to make enough vitamin D to last the whole year. While pregnant or breastfeeding it's important to take a supplement to supply baby as well as yourself.

Both folic acid and vitamin D can be topped up with dietary sources. Foods which are good sources of folic acid include dark green, leafy vegetables (kale, spinach, broccoli), beans and pulses, yeast extracts and brown rice. Some foods are fortified with folic acid and it's a good idea to eat these foods daily - this includes most breakfast cereals and some breads (always check the label). Dietary sources of vitamin D are less widespread. The richest source by far are oily types of fish, and these are also rich in omega 3's (see page 114). Lean red meats and eggs are also useful sources and check your breakfast cereal as some are fortified with vitamin D.

MORNING SICKNESS MOMENTS

Morning sickness is incredibly common in the first trimester, varying in severity from a minor inconvenience to a major challenge. This is also thought to be caused by the rapid changes in hormone levels that accompany early pregnancy, and as your body



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gets used to these, the feelings of sickness usually lessen. Traditional advice to eat small, dry carbohydrate foods frequently should work. Ginger (foods, tea or supplements) can help some women and a travel sickness acupressure wrist bands are also worth a try.

IRON OUT THE BLUES

Many women in the UK eat less iron than is recommended

for good health - in fact on average we eat just two thirds of what we should. It's not surprising that when supplying a growing baby, women's iron levels can fall a little low. Iron levels are routinely checked during pregnancy as low iron status or anaemia not only make pregnancy uncomfortable for women (it's no fun being out of breath after only a few stairs),

but can affect the baby's growth and development.

Lean red meats are a great source of iron so try to eat these 2-3 times each week. Other non-meat sources include fortified breakfast cereals (also great as a snack), pulses such as baked beans, chickpeas and lentils, eggs (iron is in the yolk), dried fruits, dark green leafy vegetables, nuts and seeds. The body absorbs iron more easily when it's mixed with vitamin C so try to combine iron rich foods with citrus fruit, tomatoes, or a glass of orange juice.

OMG FOR OMEGA 3'S

Omega 3 fatty acids are also called DHA and EPA and the most concentrated source of these is from oily types of fish. One particular omega 3 (DHA) is especially important during pregnancy and breastfeeding as it helps to support baby's brain and eye development. Eating one or two portions of oily fish each week should provide enough - but avoid too much tuna (<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/pages/foods-to-avoid-pregnant.aspx#fish>). If you can't face fish, some supplements contain omega 3's but it's important to stick only to **pregnancy supplements** as others could contain levels of vitamin A that are too high for your baby.

Wheat bran fibre is very effective at improving digestive wellbeing



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BONE UP ON CALCIUM

You are building your baby a whole new skeleton so it's probably no surprise that you need extra calcium to do this. The best sources of calcium are dairy foods such as milk (low fat is fine), yoghurts, cheeses, canned fish (if bones are eaten), tofu, pulses (including baked beans) and almonds. Aim to have a food or drink rich in calcium three times every day. If you don't like to drink milk then make something with it such as custard, cheese sauce, instant dessert, smoothies or

milk shakes, hot chocolate, or even a cappuccino or latte (but watch your caffeine intake).

EATING WELL FOR LIFE

Pregnancy is a great time to take stock of your eating habits, so make sure you are having a healthy balanced diet, and if necessary, improve your eating habits forever. Your new baby will learn from you what good eating habits are so now is the time to brush up on healthy eating and make sure that your whole family's diet is in great shape.

Most midwives will be able to support you with healthy eating advice. Lots of information and advice on general healthy eating plus diet for pregnancy and breastfeeding can be found online on the NHS Choices website.

References available upon request.

AUTHOR BIO

Since qualifying as a Registered Dietitian, Angie Jefferson BSc (Hons) RD, RNutr has researched, written and discussed with consumers and health professionals almost every aspect of diet and health. Her overriding aim is to deliver simple positive messages for optimal nutrition.

