

Healthy eating

eating while you are pregnant

choosing food
to keep you
and your baby
healthy



FOOD
STANDARDS
AGENCY

During pregnancy you need to make sure that your diet is providing enough energy and nutrients for your baby to grow and develop, and for your body to cope with the changes taking place. This booklet contains practical advice to help you make some healthy food choices while you're pregnant.

Q What should I be eating?

A It's important to try to eat a variety of foods including:

- Plenty of fruit and vegetables (fresh, frozen, tinned, dried or a glass of juice) – aim for at least five portions of a variety of fruit and vegetables a day.
- Plenty of starchy foods, such as bread, pasta, rice and potatoes.
- Some protein, such as lean meat and chicken, fish (aim for at least two servings of fish a week, including one of oily fish), eggs and pulses (such as beans, peas and lentils). These are also good sources of iron (see page 2).
- Plenty of fibre, found in wholegrain bread, wholegrain cereals, pasta, rice, pulses, and fruit and vegetables – this helps prevent constipation.
- Some dairy foods such as milk, cheese and yoghurt, which contain calcium. These are also good sources of protein.



Q Do I need extra iron?

- A Pregnant women can become short of iron, so make sure you choose plenty of iron-rich foods. Try to have some food or drink containing vitamin C, such as a glass of fruit juice, at the same time as an iron-rich meal because this might help your body absorb the iron.



Drinking tea or coffee can make it harder for the body to absorb iron, so cutting down on tea and coffee at meal times could help improve iron levels in the body.

Good sources of iron

- red meat (choose lean cuts)
- pulses
- bread
- green leafy vegetables
- wholegrain starchy foods and fortified breakfast cereals
- dried fruit

Although liver also contains lots of iron, you should avoid eating it while you're pregnant. (See **Is there any food I should avoid?** on page 4.)

If the iron level in your blood becomes low, your GP or midwife may advise you to take iron supplements.



Q Do I need to take any vitamin supplements?

You should take a 400 microgram (mcg) folic acid supplement each day from the time you stop using contraception, until the 12th week of your pregnancy.

You should also eat foods containing folate – the natural form of folic acid, such as green leafy vegetables, fortified breakfast cereals and brown rice.

Folic acid has been shown to reduce the risk of neural tube defects such as spina bifida. If you want to get your folic acid from a multivitamin tablet, make sure it contains 400mcg and does not contain vitamin A (or retinol). (See **Is there any food I should avoid?** on page 4.)

If you have already had a pregnancy affected by a neural tube defect, consult your GP for advice.

You should take supplements containing 10mcg of vitamin D each day.

Oily fish, eggs and some fat spreads provide vitamin D in our diet but most of our vitamin D comes from the action of sunlight on our skin. But remember, if you're out in the sun, take care not to burn.

If you are of Asian origin, have dark skin or if you always cover up all your skin when you're outside, you may be particularly short of vitamin D. Ask your GP for more information.

If you or your family get Income Support, Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance or Child Tax Credit, you may be able to get free vitamin supplements through Healthy Start. Check with your midwife.

Q Is there any food I should avoid?

A There are certain foods you shouldn't eat while you're pregnant because they can contain high levels of listeria, a germ that can cause miscarriage, stillbirth or severe illness in a newborn baby. Remember to avoid the following:

- Cheeses, such as Camembert, Brie or chevre (a type of goats' cheese), or others that have a similar rind. You should also avoid soft blue cheese. You don't need to avoid hard cheeses (such as Parmesan and Cheddar), cottage cheese and processed cheese.
- Pâté (any type, including vegetable).
- Uncooked or undercooked ready meals. Make sure you heat ready meals until they're piping hot all the way through.

You should also remember to:

- Avoid eating raw eggs and food containing raw or partially cooked eggs. Only eat eggs that have been cooked until both the white and yolk are solid. This is to avoid the risk of salmonella, which causes a type of food poisoning.
- Always wash your hands after handling raw meat, and keep raw foods separate from ready-to-eat foods. This is to avoid food poisoning germs, such as salmonella, campylobacter and *E. coli* O157.
- Make sure you only eat meat that has been well cooked. Take particular care with poultry, sausages and minced meat.
- Always wear gloves when you're gardening or changing cat litter, and wash your hands afterwards. This is to avoid toxoplasmosis, an infection caused by a parasite found in meat, cat faeces and soil. Toxoplasmosis can be harmful to unborn babies.



- Make sure you don't have too much vitamin A. This means you should avoid taking supplements containing vitamin A and fish liver oil supplements (which contain high levels of vitamin A) and avoid eating liver and liver products such as pâté. You need some vitamin A, but too much could harm your baby. Ask your GP or midwife if you would like more information.
- Avoid eating shark, swordfish and marlin. And limit the amount of tuna you eat to no more than two steaks a week (weighing about 140g cooked or 170g raw) or four medium-size cans a week (about 140g drained weight per can). This is because of the levels of mercury in these fish. At high levels, mercury can harm a baby's developing nervous system.
- Have no more than two portions of oily fish a week. Oily fish includes fresh tuna (not canned tuna), mackerel, sardines and trout.
- Choose cooked shellfish rather than raw. This is because raw shellfish might be contaminated with harmful bacteria and viruses that could cause food poisoning. And food poisoning can be particularly unpleasant during pregnancy.

It's also a good idea to:

- Cut down on foods such as cakes and biscuits, because these are high in fat and sugar. This can also help you to avoid putting on too much weight during pregnancy.

Some healthier light meals and snacks

- sandwiches or pitta bread filled with chicken, cottage cheese or lean ham
- low-fat yoghurts
- vegetable and bean soups
- fruit – fresh, canned in juice or dried fruit



Q Do I need to cut out caffeine?

A You should limit the amount of caffeine you have each day, but you don't need to cut it out completely. Caffeine occurs naturally in some food and hot drinks, such as coffee, tea and chocolate, and it's also added to some soft drinks and 'energy' drinks.

It's important not to have more than 200mg of caffeine a day. This is because high levels of caffeine can result in babies having a low birth weight, which can increase the risk of health problems in later life. High levels of caffeine might also cause miscarriage.

The amount of caffeine in food and drink will vary, but as a guide each of these contains roughly 200mg:

- 2 mugs of instant coffee (100mg each)
- 1 mug of filter coffee (140mg each)
- 2 mugs of tea (75mg each)
- 5 cans of cola (up to 40mg each)
- 2 cans of 'energy' drink (up to 80mg each)
- 4 bars of plain chocolate, weighing 50g each (up to 50mg each) – milk chocolate contains about half the caffeine of plain chocolate



So, if you eat a bar of plain chocolate and drink one mug of filter coffee in a day, or if you drink two mugs of tea and a can of cola, you'll have almost reached 200mg. But don't worry if you occasionally have more than this, because the risks are likely to be very small.

Caffeine is also found in certain cold and flu remedies. Check with your GP or another health professional before taking any medication or over-the-counter remedies.

Q Do I need to cut out alcohol?

- A It's best to stop drinking altogether when you're pregnant. But if you do drink, limit yourself to no more than 1 or 2 units of alcohol, once or twice a week and don't get drunk. A unit is half a pint of standard-strength beer, lager or cider, or a single 25ml measure of spirits. A glass of wine is about 2 units and alcopops are about 1.5 units.

Q Do I need to stop eating peanuts?

- A You may have heard that some women have chosen not to eat peanuts when they're pregnant or breastfeeding. But it isn't clear from the latest science if eating peanuts (or not eating them) when you're pregnant affects the chances of your baby developing a peanut allergy.

So if you would like to eat peanuts or foods containing peanuts (such as peanut butter) when you're pregnant, you can choose to do so, unless you're allergic to them yourself.

Q How much weight should I expect to put on?

- A Weight gain varies and depends on what you weighed before you became pregnant. But most women put on 10 to 12.5kg (22 to 28lb) over the whole of their pregnancy.

If you gain too much weight, this can affect your health and increase your blood pressure. But equally, it's important that you don't try to diet. If you are concerned about your weight talk to your GP or midwife.

Cutting down on fatty and sugary food and drink may help you to avoid gaining excessive weight during pregnancy.



Q Where can I get more information?

- A You might find it useful to read **The pregnancy book**, which is published by health departments in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and is available free to first-time parents. Health Scotland produces a book called **Ready Steady Baby!**, which is free to all pregnant women in Scotland.

If you haven't already got a copy of one of these, speak to your midwife, health visitor or GP, or contact your local health promotion unit (or department in Scotland).

You can find out more about food at eatwell.gov.uk





eatwell.gov.uk/pregnancy

For more information and advice about food,
visit the Food Standards Agency's websites:

eatwell.gov.uk

food.gov.uk

For further copies of this downloadable booklet,
visit: **food.gov.uk/aboutus/publications**