

# Tips for Good Nutrition in Pregnancy:



## Frequently Asked Questions

Good nutrition during pregnancy is important for the health of you and your baby. Here are some common questions and answers about nutrition during pregnancy...

## **1. Which nutrients are most important in pregnancy? How can I make sure I'm getting enough?**

When you are pregnant it is especially important to get enough of all vitamins and minerals, but some nutrients are more important than others.

- Folate helps the development of your baby's spine, skull, and brain. Folate is found in foods such as whole grain breads and cereals, vegetables, and beans.
- You need calcium and vitamin D for your bones and for your baby's bones to develop. Dairy products such as milk, cheese, and yogurt, are your best sources of calcium. Other foods that have calcium in lesser amounts include salmon, broccoli, almonds and tofu. Vitamin D is needed to help absorb the calcium in your body. The best sources of vitamin D are milk, fortified milk alternatives (e.g. soya milk), margarine, eggs and salmon.
- You need extra iron during pregnancy because you have an increased blood supply to help deliver nutrients to your baby. Some excellent sources of iron include beef, chicken, turkey, fish, beans, fortified cereals, and dried fruit. Liver also has iron and lots of nutrients such as folic acid, iron, and vitamin A. However, eating liver often can give you too much vitamin A and may be harmful to the baby. During pregnancy limit the amount of liver you eat, however; the safe amount of liver to eat is not known.
- Essential fatty acids, omega-6 and omega-3, are needed to develop your baby's brain and eyes. You can find essential fatty acids mostly in fatty fish, such as mackerel, herring, salmon, and trout. They are also found in nuts, seeds, and oils such as flax, walnuts, and canola oil.

Choosing a variety of foods from Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating can help you include the right amount of fruits, vegetables, grains, dairy products, and meats and alternatives to get the nutrients you need. Refer to Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating and aim to meet the number of suggested servings each day for each food group.



## **2. Do I need a vitamin supplement?**

Sometimes, even if you meet all the food group requirements, you may not get enough of the nutrients you need. A vitamin supplement can help you meet your needs, but it should be used along with healthy eating and not instead of healthy eating.

It is recommended by Health Canada and the Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada (SOGC) that all healthy women take a folic acid supplement of 400 mcg (0.4 mg) each day to help the development of their baby's spine, skull and brain. Even when taking the supplement it is still important to eat foods with folic acid. Prenatal vitamins and most multivitamins have an adequate amount of folic acid.

There is new limited research that shows taking a supplement of 5000 mcg (5 mg) of folic acid a day is helpful to ensure the healthy development of your baby. If you have health conditions such as diabetes or epilepsy, or if you have a family history of neural tube defects, you will need extra folic acid. Speak to your doctor too see how much folic acid you should take.

Your healthcare providers may suggest an iron supplement if they feel that you are not getting enough in your diet. When taking an iron supplement, take it with foods that have lots of vitamin C such as oranges, tomatoes or broccoli; this will help your body absorb the iron. Calcium from dairy products, as well as tea and coffee can reduce the body's ability to absorb iron so try to eat dairy foods at different times than you eat iron-containing foods.

## **3. How much weight should I gain during my pregnancy?**

The suggested amount of weight gain during your pregnancy depends on how much you weighed before you became pregnant. You will need to gain weight in pregnancy to support your baby's growth and development and for you to stay healthy; this weight gain is a combination of the baby, breast tissue, amniotic fluid, uterus, fat tissue, blood, and other fluids. Not gaining enough weight during pregnancy may lead to having a pre-term birth and a low birth-weight baby who is at greater risk for having poor health. Gaining too much weight may lead to a high-birth weight baby which can make delivery more difficult and also put the baby's health at risk. As well, extra weight gain increases your risk of health conditions such as gestational diabetes.

Depending on your pre-pregnancy body weight, it will be recommended that you gain between 15-35 pounds overall. Two to eight pounds of weight gain is recommended during your 1<sup>st</sup> trimester of pregnancy and about one pound per week during your 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> trimester of pregnancy. If you were underweight pre-pregnancy, it will be recommended you gain more weight and if you were overweight pre-pregnancy, it will be recommended you gain less weight.

## **4. Should I take Omega-3 fatty acid supplements?**

Supplements of essential fatty acids are not recommended during pregnancy. There is no guarantee that omega-3 supplements are safe and what dose is effective plus they are currently not approved by Canada's Food & Drug Agency. As well, the source of omega-3 fatty acid is questionable in supplements and can be, for example, from a fish source containing high levels of mercury. Therefore, we recommend getting omega-3 fatty acids from food sources such as salmon, omega-3 eggs, flaxseed, and walnuts.

## **5. Are fad diets safe during pregnancy?**

Restrictive ‘fad’ diets such as low carbohydrate diets are not a healthy approach to eating at any time, and this is especially true during pregnancy. By restricting certain food groups or not eating enough calories, your baby may not get enough of the nutrients needed for proper growth and development. For example, low-carbohydrate diets may be inadequate in providing sources of iron, fibre, folate, and other B vitamins which are important nutrients during pregnancy. It is important to eat a variety of nutritious foods from Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating and to gain a healthy amount of weight.

## **6. What food safety precautions are important during pregnancy?**

When you are pregnant, food-borne illnesses such as Salmonella and E. coli can be passed to the baby and may cause the baby to have diarrhea, fever or meningitis, once he or she is born. Safe food handling will help you avoid food-borne illnesses.

Here are some tips:

- Always wash your hands, cutting boards, and utensils with hot, soapy water before and after preparing food.
- Use separate utensils for meats and other foods, and also use separate utensils for raw and cooked meats.
- Do not eat cooked food that has been out of the fridge for more than two hours.
- Keep your hot foods hot (60 degrees Celsius) and your cold foods cold (4 degrees Celsius). Keep meats in the coldest part of your refrigerator.
- Make sure that meats are well cooked. A meat thermometer can help you to know when meats have been cooked to a safe temperature; cook meats to 70-75 degrees Celsius and reheat to at least 74 degrees Celsius. Fish should be cooked until it flakes easily with a fork.
- Avoid raw eggs including those in sauces, dressings, and beverages; cook egg yolks and egg whites until firm.
- Wash all fruit and vegetables before eating them.
- Since cats are a host for a parasite that can lead to an illness called toxoplasmosis, have a family member change your cats litter box and wear gloves when gardening to avoid garden soil that may contain cat droppings.

## **7. What is Listeria monocytogenes?**

Listeria monocytogenes is a type of bacteria that can cause food-borne illness, especially during pregnancy, with symptoms similar to stomach flu such as nausea, vomiting, stomach cramps, diarrhea and fever. It is possible for Listeria monocytogenes to cause severe illness, miscarriage, and stillbirth.

To avoid this illness:

- Only eat foods and drink liquids that are pasteurized, such as juice, milk, honey, or cheese.
- Avoid hot dogs unless they are reheated until steaming hot, although you are less likely to get Listeria monocytogenes from this food.
- If you choose to eat deli meats, buy freshly shaved deli meats instead of the ones that have already been sliced and eat within two days of buying it.
- Avoid unpasteurized soft cheeses such as feta, brie, Camembert, Roquefort, blue-veined, queso blanco, queso fresco, Panela, or goat cheese. Soft cheeses made from pasteurized milk are safe. If you eat these cheeses at a restaurant ask your server if they are pasteurized, and always check the label of imported cheeses.
- Do not eat pâtés or meat spreads.
- Avoid uncooked meats, fish, and poultry

## **8. How can I help my constipation?**

It is very common to experience constipation during pregnancy. Eating foods that have fibre, such as whole grain breads and cereals, fruits, vegetables, and beans can help you have more regular bowel movements. Drinking lots of fluids (8-12 cups each day) such as water, milk, or juice can also help relieve constipation. Regular physical activity is also helpful, but be sure to keep your doctor informed of the types of physical activity you are doing.

## **9. How can I manage my heartburn?**

Many women experience heartburn as the baby grows and presses on the stomach. To help reduce heartburn, eat smaller meals more often, do not lie down for 1-2 hours after eating. Try to drink beverages between meals instead of with meals. It may also be helpful to keep track of the foods you eat to become aware of those foods that tend to trigger heartburn.

## **10. Why am I craving non-food items?**

Sometimes pregnant women feel the urge to eat non-food items such as dirt, clay or laundry detergent. This craving is called *pica*. It is not known why some women crave non-food items, but it has been thought that perhaps there is a vitamin or mineral missing from their diets. Eating non-food items may be toxic or these items may take the place of healthy foods and put you at nutritional risk. If you have these types of cravings, please speak to your healthcare providers.

## 11. Can I have caffeine during pregnancy?

Caffeine is a natural part of foods such as coffee, tea, and chocolate. Too much caffeine during pregnancy may increase the risk of miscarriage and the chances that the baby will have a low birth weight. When you are pregnant it is safe to have a maximum of 150 mg/day of caffeine according to Motherisk, while Health Canada says 300 mg/day is safe. Choose decaffeinated coffee and other beverages, when possible.

**How much caffeine is there?** (These values are approximate)

8 oz. (1 cup) of brewed coffee (at home)	135 mg
8 oz. (1 cup) brewed coffee at Starbucks	170 mg
1 oz (30 ml) espresso	40 mg
8 oz. (1 cup) average black tea	43 mg
8 oz. (1 cup) green tea	30 mg
8 oz. (1 cup) regular cola	40 mg
8 oz. (1 cup) roasted and ground, decaffeinated coffee	3-10 mg
8 oz. (1 cup) chocolate milk	8 mg
8 oz. (1 cup) decaffeinated tea	0-60 mg

Be aware of “hidden” sources of caffeine. For instance, guarana, a natural herb that has the same effect as caffeine, is found in many energy drinks. Be sure to check the label of all beverages.

## 12. Is it safe to use artificial sweeteners if I am pregnant?

Some sweeteners are safe to have during pregnancy while others are not. Sweeteners such as aspartame (found in Equal and Nutrasweet), sucralose (found in Splenda), and acesulfame-potassium can be found in many different foods such as diet pop, desserts, yogurt, cereals, and gum, and are safe to consume. It is safe to have up to 40 milligrams of aspartame per kilogram of body weight each day. For example, for someone who weighs 60 kilograms (132 pounds) this would mean that she could safely drink 16 cans of diet pop in one day (remember that some diet pops have caffeine and should be counted as part of your maximum caffeine intake for the day). **Avoid the sweeteners that contain saccharin and cyclamates such as Sweet 'N Low and Sugar Twin.** If you have been using these sweeteners, stop using them right away and choose Equal, Nutrasweet or Splenda instead.

*While it is safe to have caffeine and artificial sweeteners it is still important to enjoy them in moderation and be sure that they do not take the place of more nutritious foods.*

## **13. Is it safe to drink herbal teas when I am pregnant?**

There is little information available about herbal teas and their possible effects on pregnancy, however; some have been found to cause contractions or birth defects.

It is safe to have **2-3 cups per day** of the following teas: **citrus peel, ginger, lemon balm, linden flower, orange peel and rose hip**. *Note: Linden flower is not safe if you have a heart problem.* Some herbal teas, such as chamomile, for example, are known to be unsafe for expecting mothers; be sure to check with your healthcare providers before drinking any herbal teas.

Remember that some herbal teas have caffeine and should be counted as part of your maximum caffeine intake for the day. If you like hot beverages you may want to try hot water with lemon, hot milk, hot apple juice, or Ovaltine, which do not contain caffeine.

Information about the safety of herbal teas changes often; if you are not sure about the tea that you are drinking please ask your healthcare provider.

## **14. Which types of fish are safe to eat during pregnancy?**

Fish is a healthy choice during pregnancy as it is an excellent source of high-quality protein and low in saturated fat. However, some types of fish have unhealthy levels of mercury that may cause cerebral palsy, poor physical and mental development, blindness, or deafness in your baby.

Pregnant women can eat **two meals per week** (75g each or  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup) of **low-mercury containing fish** such as light canned tuna (skipjack or yellowfin), salmon, cod, pollock, sole, shrimp, mussels, char, herring, mackerel, sardines, and scallops.

- Health Canada's most recent recommendation states that pregnant women should limit their consumption of **high-mercury containing fish** such as shark, swordfish, marlin, orange roughy, escolar, fresh and frozen tuna to **one meal per month** (150g per month or 1 cup).

Health Canada also recommend that pregnant women should limit their consumption of **canned albacore or white tuna** (not light canned tuna) to **300g per week** (1 Food Guide serving = 75g or  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup)

- The Ontario Public Health Association recommendations differ from Health Canada's which advises pregnant women to limit their consumption of canned albacore or white tuna to **one can per month** (1 can ~170g) and that fresh or frozen predatory should be **avoided** during pregnancy.

While you are pregnant, it is also important to avoid eating raw fish such as sushi or sashimi, raw oysters, or clams.

## **15. Are foods with nitrites safe to eat?**

There is little information available about nitrites, which are used in foods as preservatives or colour enhancers, but some studies have raised concerns about possible health risks during pregnancy. Different amounts of nitrites are found in water, cured meats such as sausage or smoked meats, vegetables such as beets, corn, and spinach, and in baked goods, as well as many other foods. There is not enough research at this time to make recommendations about foods with nitrites; it is therefore important to always choose a variety of foods.

## **16. Is it safe to eat peanuts when I am pregnant?**

Peanuts are a nutritious source of protein, vitamins, and minerals. However, if you or any of your family members have asthma or other food allergies, peanuts may not be the best choice for you. If this is a concern for you, have your doctor refer you to an allergy specialist who can help.

## **17. Is it safe to drink tap water when I am pregnant?**

Canada's tap water is tested regularly to make sure that it is safe to drink. If your water comes from a well it is important that it meets safety standards. To make sure that you are drinking safe water you can let the tap run for about two minutes at the start of each day to flush the pipes, drink only from the cold water tap, and boil water for at least one minute before you drink it.

Do not drink from lakes, streams, or rivers because you cannot be sure of the safety of this water.

## **18. Is it safe to drink alcohol when I am pregnant?**

It is important to avoid alcohol when you are pregnant. Alcohol may cause birth defects, poor development, or learning disabilities. If alcohol intake is a challenge for you, please speak to your caregivers.

If you have more questions or need specific information about weight gain, nausea and vomiting, or have a special eating issue, please speak to your health care provider.

### **For more information, visit:**

Motherisk: [www.motherisk.org](http://www.motherisk.org)

Health Canada: [www.hc-sc.gc.ca](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca)

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