

## Eating for a Healthy Pregnancy



Making nutritious choices is especially important while you are pregnant. Eating well gives your baby the nutrients they need to grow and develop. It also helps lower your risk of having health problems such as low iron or high blood pressure. Here are answers to some common questions about eating for a healthy pregnancy.

### What should I eat while I am pregnant?

- Eat a variety of vegetables and fruits, whole grains and protein foods each day following [Canada's Food Guide](#).
- A good guide is to fill half your plate with vegetables and fruits, one quarter of your plate with whole grains and a quarter with protein foods like legumes, tofu, lean meats, fish or eggs.
- Aim to eat three meals a day with nutritious snacks in between.

- Limit foods high in fat, salt and sugar like chips, salted pretzels, candy, sweetened beverages, cakes and cookies.
- Drink water regularly to satisfy your thirst.

## Should I take a prenatal multivitamin when I am pregnant?

Yes. While you are pregnant it is difficult to meet your needs for folic acid and iron through food alone. Prenatal multivitamins are also lower in Vitamin A. Too much vitamin A may cause birth defects, especially during the first trimester. Choose a prenatal multivitamin that has:

- 0.4 mg (400 mcg) folic acid. Do not take more than 1mg (1000 mcg) per day.
- 16-20 mg of iron. Some women may need more. Talk to your health care provider about the amount of iron you need.
- Vitamin B12.

Ask your dietitian or health care provider to help you find a prenatal multivitamin that is right for you.

## What nutrients are important during pregnancy?

There are many nutrients that you and your baby need to be healthy. Some nutrients, like folate (folic acid), iron, calcium and omega-3 fats are especially important during pregnancy.

### Folic acid

Folic acid is a B vitamin that helps build new cells. Folic acid is the form found in vitamin supplements while folate is the form found in food. Getting enough of this nutrient can help lower the risk of birth defects that affect the brain and spinal cord, called neural tube defects. To meet your folic acid/folate needs, especially in the first trimester, take a daily prenatal multivitamin. Try these meal and snack ideas that are rich in folic acid:

- Add spinach, collards and mustard greens to soups and stews. Try this avocado, kale and quinoa salad.
- Use green vegetables such as broccoli, asparagus, okra and Brussels sprouts in a stir-fry.
- Enjoy beans and lentils more often. Try chili, bean curries and dals, hummus and lentil soups. Try this 5 minute lentil hummus.
- Have a handful of edamame (fresh soy beans), sunflower seeds or peanuts as a snack.

## Iron

Iron helps build new red blood cells and helps them carry oxygen. The amount of blood you have while you are pregnant increases to meet the needs of you and your baby. Getting enough iron helps your baby store iron for when they are born. To meet your iron needs throughout pregnancy take a daily prenatal multivitamin. It is also important to get iron from foods:

- Our bodies absorb heme iron best, which usually comes from animal foods. Choose foods high in heme iron like meat, poultry, fish and shellfish.
- Non-heme iron can be found in plant foods, but is not absorbed by our bodies as well as heme iron is. Plant foods that have iron include beans and lentils, whole grain and enriched breads and pasta, fortified breakfast cereals, green leafy vegetables, dried fruits, nuts, seeds, tofu and eggs. Include foods rich in vitamin C to help your body use non-heme iron. Try these meal and snack ideas:
  - Add beans or lentils to a tomato-based pasta sauce.
  - Toss pumpkin seeds, cashews or pine nuts into salads or a stir-fry.
  - Try bean tacos. Top with tomatoes, spinach and red peppers.
  - Top whole grain cereal with strawberries and kiwi.
  - Try these bean stuffed cabbage rolls or chickpea tikka masala for tasty, iron-rich meals.

## Calcium

Calcium helps build strong bones and teeth for your baby. It also helps the heart, nerves and muscles grow. If you do not get enough calcium from food or supplements, it is taken from your bones to help your baby develop. To meet your calcium needs throughout pregnancy choose calcium-rich foods such as milk, yogurt, cheese, fortified plant-based beverages and tofu. Give this Cocoa Coconut Banana Smoothie or Cheddar Lentil Crispies a try.

It is best to get your calcium from foods. High calcium foods provide many other important nutrients that are not found in calcium supplements.

## Omega-3 fats

Omega-3 fats are important for your baby's brain and eye development. Omega-3 fats are found in only a few foods such as fish and seafood. There are also some plant sources of omega-3 fats like nuts, seeds and soy. To meet your omega-3 fat needs throughout pregnancy:

Eat fatty fish. Fatty fish include salmon, mackerel, anchovies, sardines, herring, Arctic Char and trout. Choose fish that is low in mercury more often.

Choose other food sources of omega-3 fats like walnuts, ground flax seeds and flax seed oil, chia seeds, soy products and canola oil.

Some foods in the grocery store have added omega-3 fats. Look for the words “omega-3”, “ALA”, “EPA”, or “DHA” on the nutrition labels of foods like eggs, margarine, cow’s milk, yogurt, fortified plant-based beverages, bread and cereal. The amount of omega-3 fats in these foods varies.

If you do not eat fish, you can consider taking a fish oil supplements while you are pregnant. Always check with your health care provider before starting a new supplement. If you already eat fatty fish regularly, taking fish oil supplements has not been shown to have any extra benefits for your baby. If you are vegetarian or vegan, you can take an algal oil supplement, which also contains omega-3.

Note: avoid cod liver oil or other fish liver oil supplements as they are not recommended during pregnancy.

## Are there foods I have to avoid when I am pregnant?

It is recommended that you avoid alcohol while pregnant. There is no type or amount of alcohol that is safe to drink during pregnancy.

To reduce your risk of food poisoning during pregnancy, there are some foods that are recommended that you avoid. Read our article on food safety during pregnancy for more information.

It is recommended that you limit your intake of liver to less than 1 serving per week during the first trimester. Liver contains high amounts of vitamin A.

When it comes to caffeine and coffee and tea, you can safely enjoy up to 300 mg of caffeine per day, which is about 2 cups of coffee (1 cup is equal to 8 ounces)

Read more about pregnancy and alcohol, caffeine, supplements, energy drinks and more in this article.

## Bottom line

When you are pregnant, it is important to eat a variety of healthy foods everyday and take a prenatal vitamin. A dietitian can help you make sure you are getting enough folate, calcium, iron, omega-3 and other important nutrients to support your pregnancy.

*This article was written and reviewed by dietitians from Dietitians of Canada. The advice in this article is intended as general information and should not replace advice given by your dietitian or healthcare provider.*