

# Pregnancy nutrition factsheet: What to eat when you're expecting

By Dr Linia Patel PhD

**“Eat this.” “Don’t eat that.” Mums-to-be want to do their best for their babies, yet the advice they can get about what to eat and what not to eat may get very confusing. Here is your quick nutrition go-to guide.**

## Top tips

- Eat a varied diet, including foods from the main food groups.
- Have regular meals (i.e., three meals a day and a snack).
- Include a source of iron- and calcium-rich food daily.
- If you opt for plant-based milks (as an alternative to cows’ milk), choose one that is fortified with calcium and iodine.
- Take a daily supplement of 400mcg folic acid and 10mcg vitamin D3.
- Know which foods you need to avoid and those you need to limit.
- If you are on a more restrictive diet (e.g., vegan) or if you are underweight (BMI<18.5kg/m<sup>2</sup>) or are overweight (BMI>25kg/m<sup>2</sup>) or are having a multiple pregnancy, seek support from a dietitian.
- Exercise regularly.

## Healthy eating in pregnancy

### 1. Stay hydrated.

Hydration levels are linked to circulation, which is important for your growing baby. Drinking enough water may also help to prevent constipation and urinary tract infections. Aim for 2-2.5L of fluid a day. If you are suffering from morning sickness, drink little and often. Water and herbal teas are the best way to stay hydrated. Check the colour of your urine as feedback for how hydrated you are. Apart from the first passing in the day, your urine should be a pale straw colour.

### 2. Be vigilant about these nutrients.

A healthy and balanced diet will provide almost all the vitamins, minerals and nutrients that expecting mothers need – however, not all. Government recommendations are currently that you supplement with folic acid and vitamin D during pregnancy. Other key nutrients you need to include in your diet or may need to supplement with if you don’t consume enough are iodine and omega-3 fatty acids.

Supplement	Role
Folic acid	Prevents early neural tube defects
Iodine	Supports healthy brain and nervous system development
Vitamin D	Supports gene regulation and prevents low birth weight
Omega-3 fatty acids	Important for brain and eye development

### 3. Know which foods not to eat. Avoid the following:

- Soft, mould-ripened cheese like Brie, soft goats’ cheese and camembert
- Unpasteurised milk/dairy products
- Anything containing raw or partially cooked eggs
- All types of paté, including vegetarian paté
- Liver and liver products
- Game meats, such as goose or pheasant
- Shark, marlin or swordfish, raw fish and shellfish

#### 4. **Be careful with:**

- Fish containing mercury, such as tuna – have no more than two tuna steaks per week or four small cans of tuna
- Oily fish like salmon, mackerel, anchovies, sardines and herring – consume no more than two per week
- Cold-cured meats such as salami, chorizo and prosciutto (unless cooked thoroughly)

#### 5. **At all stages, ensure all food is fully and completely cooked!**

### **Busting pregnancy myths**

#### **Myth 1: I can eat for two**

Sadly not. While you do need extra nutrients like calcium and iron when you are pregnant, you do not need many extra calories until the third trimester – and that's only 350 calories each day. And guess what? Those extra calories need to be nutritious calories, not junk calories. If you do end up 'eating for two', you will simply just gain excess weight.

#### **Myth 2: I should always give into my pregnancy craving**

While pregnancy cravings are a real thing (caused by hormonal changes), there is no evidence to suggest that cravings are a sign of what your body needs, as the old wives' tales make us believe. Spoil yourself in moderation. If you have non-food-related cravings (such as ice or clay), this is a condition called pica that you need to discuss with your doctor.

#### **Myth 3: A mug of coffee is a no-no when I'm pregnant**

It can take pregnant women 1.5-3.5 times longer to eliminate caffeine from the body. However, moderate amounts of caffeine (200mg per day) have not been found to have a negative effect on pregnancy, so your daily cup of coffee is OK to keep having if you still fancy it.

#### **Myth 4: The occasional small glass of merlot is not allowed when you are pregnant**

It is not clear cut how much alcohol it takes to cause health problems. The current advice is, therefore, that women should avoid alcohol if they are pregnant. Although, that said, it's up to each mum-to-be to consult her doctor and decide if she'll have the occasional drink or not.

#### **Myth 5: If I avoid some foods (like peanuts, wheat or cows' milk) during my pregnancy, I can prevent my child from developing food allergies**

As the research in this area is inconclusive, it is recommended for mums-to-be not to avoid particular foods. Those mums who have a history of severe atopic disease (eczema, asthma, etc.) should still be vigilant about their intake of peanuts while more research is done.

### **How to manage possible side-effects during pregnancy:**

#### **1. Nausea:**

Eat little and often. Ginger-rich foods and drinks, dry crackers and acupressure may help. If your vomiting is severe and you are unable to keep food/water in, get medical advice.

#### **2. Constipation:**

Drink more water, move regularly and increase your intake of wholegrains and vegetables and fruit.

#### **3. Heartburn and indigestion:**

Try eating smaller regular meals and snacks. Reduce caffeine and fatty, fried and spicy foods.