

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF IN EARLY PREGNANCY



the women's
the royal women's hospital
victoria australia

There are a number of things that you can do before you get pregnant, and in the early weeks, to encourage a healthy pregnancy.

Avoid

Alcohol – It is recommended that you have no alcohol in pregnancy or while breastfeeding.

Smoking – It is known that smoking increases the risk of miscarriage and harms the growth and development of your baby. For free information, advice and support to stop smoking contact Quitline on 131 848 (available 24 hours).

Multivitamins containing retinol – Retinol is a type of vitamin A that can be harmful in large amounts. Liver also contains retinol, so it should be limited to small amounts.

Reduce

Caffeine – Tea, coffee and cola drinks all contain caffeine. You are advised to limit your intake to three cups of coffee or five cups of tea per day. Guarana is a caffeine substance used in some energy drinks such as Red Bull, V and Mother. These drinks are not recommended in pregnancy.

Get support and advice

Always make sure your GP, or specialist knows that you are pregnant. The following information is to help you think about things you might need to talk about with your GP.

Illicit drugs

These are harmful to your developing baby. If you are pregnant you should not try to stop without professional support. Seek immediate assistance from the Women's Alcohol and Drug Service (see below for contact information).

Medicines, drugs, complementary and alternative medicines

Some medications are not safe in pregnancy, including medications you have been prescribed, those you have bought over the counter or other drugs you are taking. Do not take any complementary medicines, including multivitamins without checking if they are safe during your pregnancy or while breastfeeding. Get some advice from your GP, midwife, local chemist or call the Drug Information Line at the Women's (see below for contact information).

Exercise

Exercise within your limits. The best exercise is moderate, enjoyable and something you can do on most days of the week such as walking, swimming or yoga. Avoid overheating in spas and saunas. Always drink plenty of fluids when exercising. Seek advice about strenuous exercise and fitness activities.

Family/genetic history

If you or your partner have any family health issues that can be inherited discuss them with your GP early in your pregnancy. Examples include Fragile X syndrome, thalassaemia, cystic fibrosis, Down syndrome, muscular dystrophies, spina bifida, haemophilia and cleft palate.

Your medical conditions

See your GP as soon as possible to discuss any health problems you have e.g. high blood pressure, diabetes, epilepsy, bleeding problems or heart disease.

If there is a family history of cleft lip, spinal problems or you are taking an anti-epilepsy medication, this dose may need to be greater. Please discuss this with your GP.

Diet and nutrition

Pregnancy creates extra demands for certain nutrients, including iron, calcium, iodine and many vitamins, so make sure your diet is varied and includes adequate amounts of the following:

- fruit and vegetables
- breads and cereals
- dairy foods for calcium
- lean meats, chicken and fish for iron.

Vegetarians

Lentils, beans, tofu, eggs and soy milk can replace animal foods in a vegetarian diet. If you do not eat foods derived from animals you will need to take a vitamin B12 supplement, as this vitamin is needed for the baby's brain development.

Folate

Folate (or folic acid) is a vitamin found in a variety of foods. The recommendation is to take a folate supplement for two months before you get pregnant and for the first three months of pregnancy, to reduce the risk of spinal problems such as spina bifida in your baby. As well as eating foods rich in folate, a daily supplement containing 500 mcg (0.5 mg) of folic acid is recommended.

Fish

Fish is important for developing your baby's brain and nervous tissue. One to three serves of fish per week is recommended. There are certain types of fish that should be limited because of their high levels of mercury. Shark (flake), broadbill, marlin and swordfish shouldn't be eaten more than once per fortnight and orange roughy (sea perch) and catfish, more than once per week. Other fish are safe to eat. Canned tuna is not restricted.

Iodine in pregnancy

Iodine is another nutrient that is important for your baby's brain development. To ensure adequate iodine either:

- eat fish one to three times a week, (limit high mercury types) and/or
- use iodised salt or
- take a multivitamin for pregnancy that contains iodine.

Vitamin D

Vitamin D is mostly made in the skin by the action of sunlight, but a small amount can come from foods like oily fish, egg yolks, margarine and some brands of milk. Vitamin D is important for the development of your baby's bones and teeth and low levels can cause muscle weakness and pain in women. You may be vitamin D deficient, if you:

- have darker skin
- cover most of your body in clothing
- spend most of your time indoors.

Please discuss this with your GP, who may order a vitamin D test on your blood and suggest supplements while you are pregnant and breastfeeding.

Food safety and hygiene

Listeria and toxoplasmosis are uncommon infections that can be passed onto your unborn baby.

To reduce your risk of listeria:

- wash your hands, chopping boards and cooking utensils when preparing food
- wash vegetables and fruit before eating them
- avoid cold sliced meats e.g. ham and salami, cold cooked chicken, pate, uncooked seafood, soft-serve ice-cream, pre-prepared salads and cheeses such as brie, camembert, feta and ricotta.

Listeria is killed by cooking, so make sure that when you reheat food, it is very hot.

To reduce your risk of toxoplasmosis:

- cook meat thoroughly
- wash vegetables
- wear disposable gloves if handling cat litter or gardening
- wash your hands after gardening or touching pets.

Depression

While almost everyone feels down sometimes in pregnancy, some women feel very down a lot of the time and may be depressed. Depression can be treated successfully.

Let someone know; get help from your GP or midwife, as they can make sure that you get the support you need.

Violence – doesn't need to be apart of your pregnancy

Violence, either verbal or physical, can have an enormous impact on you, your pregnancy, your baby's health and the wellbeing of other children. Your midwife or GP can provide you with confidential support and referral so that you can start thinking about ways to plan for your birth and looking after your family.

For more information

Women's Welcome Centre (Victoria only)

Royal Women's Hospital

Located to the left of the main entrance, the centre offers free information on a range of women's health issues.

Open 9.00am to 5.00pm, Monday to Friday

T: (03) 8345 3037 or 1800 442 007 (rural callers)

E: wwc.admin@thewomens.org.au

Women's Alcohol and Drug Service

Tel: (03) 8345 3931

Drug Information Line

Tel: (03) 8345 3190

More pregnancy information and fact sheets are available from the Women's website at:

www.thewomens.org.au