

# GOOD NUTRITION FOR BREASTFEEDING



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

The Women's encourages mothers to breastfeed their babies. Breast milk is the perfect food for your baby.

## Why breastfeed

Breast milk:

- » contains all the nutrients and growth factors needed for your baby's growth and development for the first few months of life
- » is specially adapted to your baby's immature digestive system
- » helps to protect your baby against infection, diarrhoea and allergies
- » is economical and already at the right temperature.

Just as your baby's nutrition is important, so is your own diet. Eating well during breastfeeding will help you meet your need for extra nutrients as well as cope with the physical demands of caring for a new baby. Try to make time in your busy schedule to eat regular, varied meals.

See the *Healthy Foods Guide* and *Sample Meals Plans* at the end of this fact sheet for information on what foods to include in your daily diet and how to incorporate the recommended daily serves into your everyday meals.

## Important nutrients during breastfeeding

### Protein

Breast milk contains protein to meet your baby's growth needs. Good sources of protein for breastfeeding mothers include meat, chicken, eggs, cheese, yoghurt and vegetarian choices such as nuts, tofu and legumes (lentils, baked beans, split peas, etc.).

### Calcium

Calcium is needed to maintain bone strength. The best sources of calcium are dairy foods. Fish with edible bones, such as canned salmon and sardines, are also a good source. There are small amounts of calcium in other foods, but on average about three-quarters of our calcium comes from dairy foods. If you drink soy or other milks such as almond or rice milk, check the label and choose a brand with the same amount of calcium as cow's milk (at least 100mg per 100ml). Low fat dairy foods are not lower in calcium than the full fat versions.

### Vitamin D

Vitamin D helps the body absorb and use calcium. It is made in the skin by the action of sunlight. Only a small amount comes from food (oily fish, egg yolk, margarine). Deficiency is common, especially in women who have darker skin, spend most of their time indoors or cover most of their body in clothing. Deficiency can cause bone weakness and muscle pain in women and skeletal abnormalities in babies. Women at risk should get their vitamin D level checked and if low a supplement will be needed. Their breastfed babies will also need a vitamin D supplement suitable for infants and children.

### Iron

Pregnancy can use up your iron stores so it is important to replenish these when breastfeeding. The richest sources of iron are liver, meat, chicken and fish. Iron is also present in legumes as well as whole grains, breakfast cereals, green leafy vegetables and Milo and Ovaltine.

Women who were diagnosed with iron deficiency in pregnancy should consult their doctor about whether to continue taking iron tablets after pregnancy to rebuild their iron stores.

### Iodine

Iodine is needed for the normal brain development of the baby. It can be difficult to get enough iodine from the Australian food supply. Seafood, dairy foods and iodine added to bread flour help meet the needs of most of the population but this may not be enough for breastfeeding women. If you are breastfeeding an extra 150 micrograms (mcg or  $\mu\text{g}$ ) a day is recommended. This level is present in most breastfeeding multivitamins. If you regularly use salt in cooking or at table, changing to iodised salt is another way of increasing iodine intake.

## Fluids

You will need plenty of fluids during breastfeeding to replace the fluid used in breast milk. You may find you are thirstier so just drink to satisfy your thirst, usually at least eight cups per day. All fluids count but water is a better choice than sugary drinks such as fruit juice, soft drink or cordial which may reduce your appetite for more nourishing foods and will not help if you are watching your weight.

## Vegetarian eating during breastfeeding

A vegetarian diet can meet nutritional needs when breastfeeding if care is taken to include adequate protein, iron, vitamin B12 and calcium-containing foods.

Nuts, seeds and legumes (dried beans and lentils) and food derived from them, such as tofu and hummus, are good sources of protein and iron (see the chart for serve sizes). Iron is not as well absorbed from these foods as it is from meat so vegetarians also need to eat other iron-containing foods such as wholegrain cereals, iron-enriched breakfast cereals, wholegrain breads and green leafy vegetables. Milo and Ovaltine are also sources of iron. Vitamin C, which is present in many fruits and vegetables, helps absorption of iron from these foods if eaten in the same meal or snack. If you do not consume dairy foods you will need either calcium-fortified soy or other milk or a calcium supplement.

Vegans and vegetarians who eat few dairy foods or eggs are at risk of vitamin B12 deficiency as this vitamin is naturally present only in foods of animal origin. It is added to certain brands of soy milk and meat substitutes but the amount in these foods may not be enough if few other sources of B12 are eaten.

B12 is needed for blood cell, nerve and brain development of the baby. Pregnancy and breastfeeding can rapidly deplete body stores. Breastfed babies of vegan mothers are particularly at risk of B12 deficiency. Women at risk should have their level checked and may need to take a supplement. If you are concerned please discuss this with your dietitian or doctor.

## Regaining your shape

Breastfeeding is an energetic process! Most women will need more kilojoules (calories) than they did during pregnancy.

Some of the extra energy can be provided by the fat stores your body laid down during pregnancy. Use your weight and appetite as a guide to your energy needs. Some women find that they need to eat more to satisfy an increase in their appetite or to prevent rapid weight loss. If necessary include extra snacks such as sandwiches, milk drinks, fruit, nuts, yoghurt, cereal and milk, cheese and crackers.

Other women have more trouble getting back to their pre-pregnant weight. If you have gained extra weight during pregnancy, breastfeeding may help you to lose some weight, but watching what you eat is also important. Aim for a slow steady weight loss over several months. Strict dieting or skipping meals is not recommended as you will not be able to meet your nutrient needs. However, try to keep the high fat, high sugar foods to a minimum and include some regular exercise. Here are some suggestions that may help.

- » Limit high fat foods such as greasy take-away, pastries, battered or crumbed foods, chips, crisps, rich desserts, chocolate, ice-cream and sweet biscuits.
- » Grilling, steaming, baking, poaching and casseroles are good low fat ways of cooking lean meat, fish or chicken.
- » Use butter or margarine sparingly.
- » Use low fat dairy products such as low fat milk, low fat yoghurt and reduced fat cheeses.
- » Although sugar has fewer kilojoules than fats, large amounts add up. Sweet drinks such as soft drinks, cordials and juices have between 4 to 14 teaspoons or sugar per drink.
- » Plan and shop so that you have the ingredients for healthy meals and snacks on hand.

## Exercise

Regular exercise will help you regain your shape and is also important for general wellbeing. Walking is a safe 'fat burning' activity and probably the most convenient while your baby is still in a pram. Aim for a 30 minute walk most days.

## Frequently asked questions

### Will certain foods cause allergy or colic?

Everything in moderation is a good rule. There is no scientific basis to suggest that some foods cause gas, wind or colic in babies. No specific food has been proven to upset babies so mothers need not avoid foods unless they continually cause problems, for example, rashes, stomach discomfort or diarrhoea in your baby.

At present there is no evidence to suggest that avoiding certain foods during breastfeeding will reduce the risk of the child developing an allergy, even if there is a family history of allergy. For more information on this speak to your doctor, dietitian or maternal and child health nurse.

If you wish to avoid foods while breastfeeding for any reason, you may need expert guidance to prevent nutritional imbalances.

### Can I drink coffee?

A small amount of caffeine from coffee, tea, cola and energy drinks enters the breast milk. Most women can drink moderate amounts of caffeinated drinks without affecting the baby. However some babies, especially newborns, are sensitive to even small amounts of caffeine and it may contribute to irritability or sleeplessness. Large amounts of caffeine may also inhibit the milk let-down reflex.

### Can I drink alcohol?

Alcohol passes into the breast milk. It reduces the amount of breast milk the baby drinks, disrupts the baby's sleep pattern and may affect the baby's development. Not drinking is the safest choice. If you choose to drink alcohol it is best avoided during the first month while breastfeeding and sleep patterns are being established. After that, (if you do drink), limit to 1 to 2 standard drinks, but don't drink every day and don't drink just before breastfeeding. Because alcohol passes quickly into breast milk it is best to drink just after breastfeeding then wait 2 to 3 hours for the level to fall before feeding again.

### Do I still need to avoid foods that may contain listeria?

No, breastfeeding is not considered to be a high risk for listeria infection so you can enjoy any favorite foods you've been missing.

### Are herbal and traditional medicines safe to take while breastfeeding?

Some herbal preparations pass through the breast milk to the baby and may be harmful. Check with a health care professional before taking these preparations. More information is available in our fact sheet Herbal and traditional medicines in breastfeeding.

### How long can I breastfeed my baby?

Breast milk alone provides all the nutrients needed for growth and development of your baby for around the first six months. After this gradually introduce solids until your baby is eating a full balanced diet. Breast milk will continue to be an important part of your baby's diet for at least the first year of life. You can continue to breastfeed, to provide comfort, nutrition and protection, for as long as you and your baby desire.

## Where to get more information

### Health information at the Women's

Visit the Women's website for more information about breastfeeding.

[www.thewomens.org.au/health-information](http://www.thewomens.org.au/health-information)

### Australian Breastfeeding Association (ABA)

The ABA website has a range of resources including information on alcohol & breastfeeding and caffeine & breastfeeding.

Tel: 1800 686 268 (Breastfeeding Helpline)

Web: [www.breastfeeding.asn.au/bfinfo](http://www.breastfeeding.asn.au/bfinfo)

### Feed Safe Alcohol and Breastfeeding

A free app developed by ABA, Reach Health Promotion Innovations and Curtin University aims to help women make the best choices about how to breastfeed and drink alcohol safely.

[www.feedsafe.net](http://www.feedsafe.net)

### Eat for Health

Visit the Australian Dietary Guidelines website for advice and resources about healthy eating, including information about the best foods for infants – look for Giving you baby the best start brochure.

[www.eatforhealth.gov.au](http://www.eatforhealth.gov.au)

## Healthy Foods Guide

Use the following table as a guide to foods you should include in your daily diet and the *Sample Meal Plans* to show how to include the recommended daily serves in your everyday meals.

Food group	Daily serves	Serve size
Vegetables & legumes/beans	7½ 5½ if aged 18 or younger	<b>A serve is around 75g or</b> » ½ cup cooked vegetables » 1 cup salad vegetables » ½ medium potato or sweet potato » ½ cup cooked dried or canned beans or lentils
Fruit	2	<b>A serve is around 150g or</b> » 1 medium fruit, 2 smaller fruit, e.g. apricots, plums » 1 cup diced or canned fruit or berries » 30g dried fruit e.g. 4 apricot halves or 1½ tablespoons sultanas
Grain (cereal) foods, mostly wholegrain or high fibre	9	<b>A serve is:</b> » ⅔ cup (30g) cereal flakes » 1 slice (40g) bread or 1 chapatti » ½ Lebanese bread or 3 crisp breads or a ½ medium roll » ½ cup (75 to 120g) cooked rice, pasta, noodles, quinoa
Milk, yoghurt, cheese and/or alternatives mostly reduced fat	2½ 4 if aged 18 or younger	<b>A serve is</b> » 1 cup (250ml) milk » 2 slices cheese (40g) » 1 small carton (200g) yoghurt » 1 cup (250ml) soy, rice, almond or other milk with at least 100g of added calcium per 100mls
Lean meat, chicken, fish, eggs, legumes/beans, nuts, seeds	2	<b>A serve is:</b> » palm sized (100g) cooked meat or chicken » medium fillet fish (150g) » 2 eggs » 1 cup (150g) cooked or canned legumes e.g. lentils, chickpeas, kidney beans » ⅔ (170g) tofu » handful (40g) nuts, seeds or nut butter
Unsaturated oils and spreads	Optional	» 14–20g per day (around 1–2 tablespoons)

## Good nutrition for breastfeeding

### Sample meal plans

Including the recommended daily serves from the five food groups (see Food Groups table) in your diet is not as difficult as it seems. By making the right choices you can easily achieve your daily targets. We have created these sample meal plans to show which food groups and how many serves can be found in typical daily meals.

Meal	Food	Portion size	Food group and number of serves
Breakfast	Wholegrain breakfast cereal, with reduced fat milk	60g cereal 1 cup (250ml) reduced fat milk	2 grain serves 1 milk/yoghurt/cheese serve
	Toast	1 slice	1 grain serve
Morning snack	English muffin	1 small	1 grain serve
Lunch	Sandwich with chicken and salad	2 slices bread 50g chicken 1 cup salad vegetables 1 tomato	2 grain serves 1/2 meat or alternative serve 1 vegetable serve 1 vegetable serve
	Apple	1 medium	1 fruit serve
Afternoon snack	Crisp bread	3 ( 35g)	1 grain serve
	Cheese	1 slice	1/2 milk/yoghurt/cheese serve
Dinner	Pasta with beef mince and red kidney beans	1 1/2 cups of cooked pasta 100g cooked mince 1/4 cup kidney beans	2 1/2 grain serves 1 meat or alternative serve 1/2 vegetable serves 1 1/2 vegetable serves
	Tomato and green salad	1 1/2 medium tomato 1/2 onion 1 1/2 cups green leafy salad 1/2 tomato	1/2 vegetable serves 1 1/2 vegetable serves 1/2 vegetable serve
Supper	Apricots and reduced fat yoghurt	1 cup stewed/tinned apricots 100g (1/2 small tub) yoghurt	1 fruit serve 1 milk/yogurt/cheese serve

For more information and tips on planning healthy meals visit the *Eat for Health* website.

[www.eatforhealth.gov.au/eating-well](http://www.eatforhealth.gov.au/eating-well)