

HEALTHY EATING WHEN YOU'RE PREGNANT



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

Now that you're pregnant it's the ideal time to review your diet. What you eat during pregnancy affects your own health and wellbeing, your developing baby and your baby's health later in life.

When pregnant you only need to increase how much you eat by a small amount but you do need more of certain nutrients.

You will get most of the nutrients you need if you eat regular meals and include foods from the five food groups each day. Each food group provides different nutrients. The food groups are:

- vegetables
- fruit
- grains
- dairy foods and calcium fortified plant milks (such as soy milk)
- meats and meat alternatives (chicken, fish, eggs, tofu, legumes, nuts and seeds).

Most women will also need folic acid and iodine supplements as it is difficult to get enough of these from food alone.

See the table at the end of the fact sheet if you would like to know more about the recommended serves to eat from the food groups.

Tips on how to include a variety of foods in your everyday meals

Aiming for half plate of vegetables, a quarter of protein and quarter of carbohydrate can help you choose the right variety and balance of food.

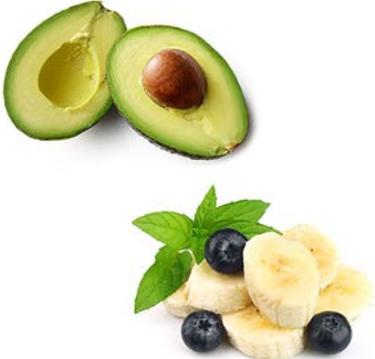
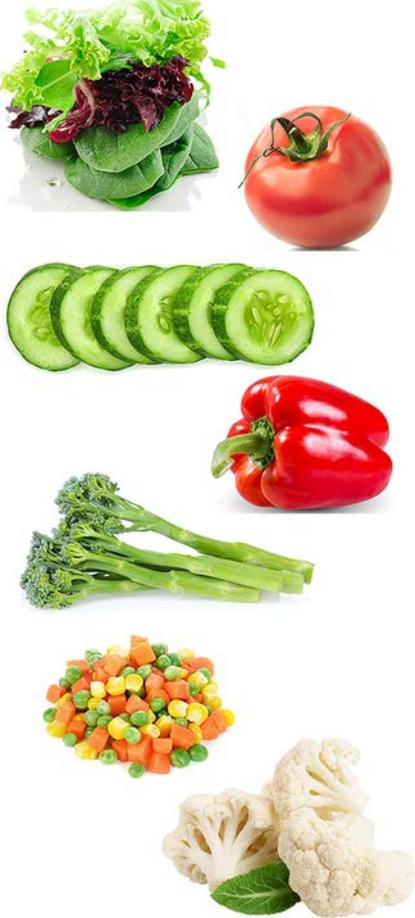
Enjoy half a plate of
**Vegetables,
salad, fruit.**



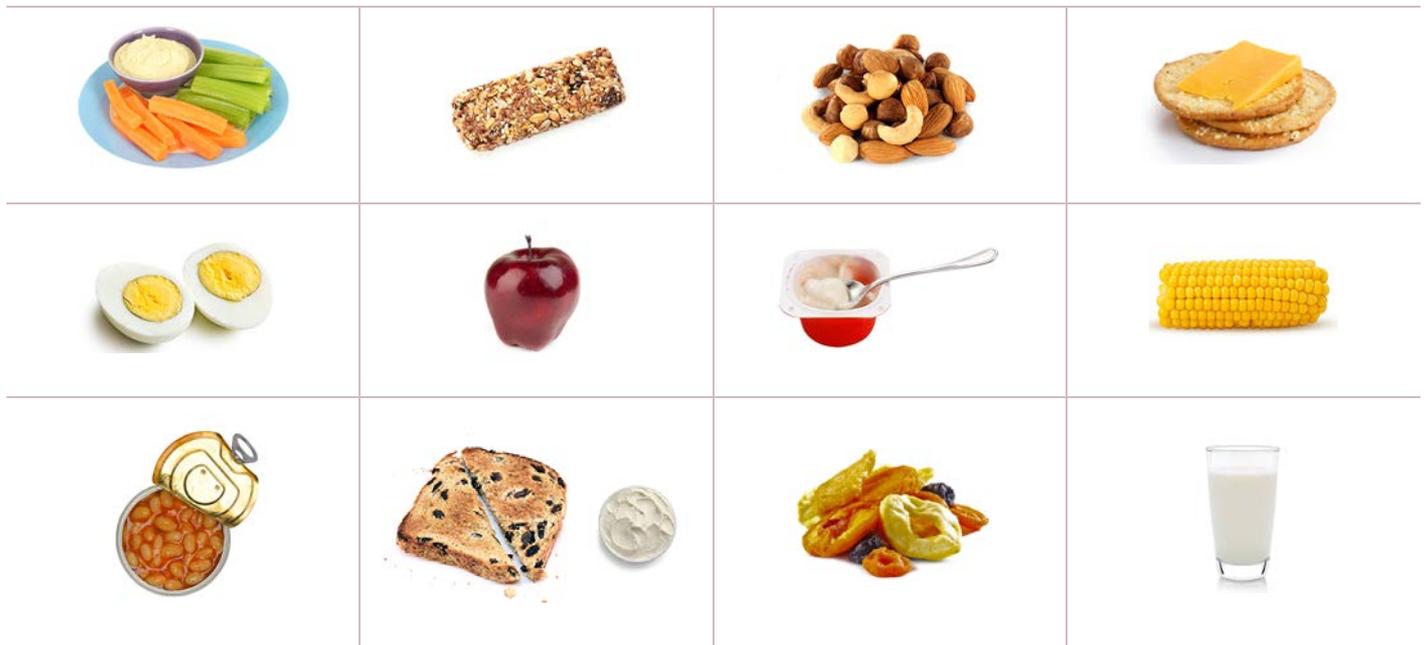
Protein. This group includes foods with **iron** i.e. meat, chicken, fish, eggs, tofu, nuts, beans and lentils. It also includes those with **calcium** i.e. dairy foods and calcium fortified plant milks. Have both in your daily diet.

Carbohydrates .
Include in most meals

Below are examples of food to include in your daily meals, that is, a carbohydrate, a protein and fruit and vegetables. Choose foods from each column when preparing your breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Carbohydrate	+	Protein	+	Vegetables, salad, fruit
Grain- based foods and starchy vegetables		Dairy foods, eggs, nuts, nut butters, fish and seafood, legumes, chicken and meat		
<p>Breakfast ideas</p> 				
<p>Lunch and dinner ideas</p> 				

Below are nutritious snack ideas if you are hungry or are unable to eat enough at mealtimes.



If nausea is affecting your food choices eat what you can manage and get back on track when you feel better. See the fact sheet *Nausea and vomiting in pregnancy (morning sickness)* for more information.

Important nutrients during pregnancy

Folic acid

Folic acid (also called folate) is a vitamin needed to build your baby's cells. In early pregnancy it can help reduce the risk of certain birth defects such as spina bifida.

It's difficult to get enough folate from food alone so you will need to take a supplement. Start taking folic acid when planning your pregnancy and continue for at least the first three months after you are pregnant. Take either a daily folic acid supplement (400 micrograms) or a pregnancy multivitamin. Some women with particular health conditions or who are overweight may be advised to take a higher dose of folic acid.

Folate is important throughout pregnancy. Green leafy vegetables, salad greens, fruit, wholegrain breads and cereals, fortified breakfast cereals, legumes and nuts are a good source of this important nutrient.

Iodine

Iodine is important for the developing brain and nervous system of your baby. As more is needed during pregnancy and breastfeeding, and it's hard to get enough from food, a daily supplement of 150 microgram of iodine is recommended. Most pregnancy multivitamins contain this dose.

Supplements are also available that contain both iodine and folic acid. Do **not** take kelp (seaweed) tablets as they may contain too much iodine. If you have a pre-existing thyroid condition speak to your doctor before taking an iodine supplement.

Protein

Protein helps build all body tissues. Aim to include protein-containing foods in each meal. Meat, chicken, fish, eggs, dairy foods, nuts and legumes (dried beans and lentils) and food made from them such as tofu and hommus are protein sources and will help your iron and calcium intake as well.

Iron

During pregnancy your body needs more iron to form red blood cells for yourself and your baby. Lack of iron can cause tiredness and if severe can increase the risk of premature birth and low birth weight babies.

Meat, chicken and fish are good sources of iron. Legumes (lentils and dried beans), nuts, whole grains and green leafy vegetables also contain iron.

Iron from plant sources is not easily absorbed by the body. Eating vitamin C-rich foods such as citrus fruits, berries, tomatoes, capsicum, at the same meal can improve this.

If tests during pregnancy show that you are low in iron you may need to take an iron supplement.

See the fact sheet Iron in Pregnancy for more information.

Calcium

Calcium helps form healthy bones. The richest source of calcium are dairy foods (note: low fat types have as much calcium as full fat versions). Fish with edible bones such as canned salmon and sardines, as well as firm tofu are also good sources. There are smaller amounts of calcium in other foods but most people get the majority of their calcium 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). You need two to three serves of calcium-rich foods each day. If you don't eat dairy foods or other calcium-fortified milks, talk to your dietitian, midwife or doctor about whether you need calcium supplements.

Vitamin D

Vitamin D helps the body to absorb and use calcium. It works together with calcium to build your baby's bones. Only a small amount of vitamin D comes from food (found in oily fish, egg yolks, margarine, milk).

Sunlight helps your body make its own vitamin D. If you are indoors a lot, have darker skin or cover most of your body in clothing your vitamin D levels may be low. Very low levels can cause bone weakness and muscle pain in women and skeletal abnormalities (called rickets) in their babies. If you are at risk you may need to take a vitamin D supplement.

Multivitamin supplements

A balanced diet is the best way to meet the increased nutrient requirements of pregnancy but if you are unable to eat well, a pregnancy multivitamin supplement may help. A multivitamin supplement can also be a convenient way of getting enough folic acid and iodine if you are not already taking these supplements.

Check that any supplements you take are suitable for pregnancy. Multivitamin supplements not designed for pregnancy may contain too much vitamin A. Ask your pharmacist, doctor or dietitian for advice if you are unsure about supplements.

Omega-3 fats

Omega-3 fatty acids are needed for healthy brain, nerve and eye development in your baby and may have other health benefits. They are found in fish, especially oily fish like tuna, salmon, sardines and mackerel. Walnuts, chia seeds, linseeds (also called flax seeds) and soybeans also contain omega-3 fats.

Eating fish two to three times a week will help meet your growing baby's needs. Some types of fish may contain too much mercury and should not be eaten often.

- Limit shark (flake), marlin, broadbill or swordfish to no more than one serve per fortnight. Eat no other fish that fortnight.
- Limit orange roughy (deep sea perch) or catfish to one serve per week. Eat no other fish that week.
- Some pregnancy multivitamins include omega-3 fats. Omega-3 supplements are also available but avoid fish liver oils as they contain too much vitamin A (retinol).

If you're vegetarian or not feeling like meat

You can still meet your nutritional needs if you are vegetarian or avoiding animal foods due to nausea or taste changes. Just take care to include foods that contain enough protein, iron, calcium and vitamin B12.

Protein and iron

Food sources - nuts, seeds and legumes (dried beans and lentils) and food made from them such as tofu and hommus are sources of protein and iron.

Other iron-containing foods - wholegrain cereals, iron-enriched breakfast cereals, wholegrain breads and green leafy vegetables will help boost your iron intake.

Include vitamin C-rich fruits and vegetables in your meals to boost iron absorption.

Calcium

If you're not eating dairy foods use calcium-fortified soy or other plant milk or take a calcium supplement.

Vitamin B12

Vitamin B12 is needed for blood cell, nerve and brain development of your baby. It is naturally present only in foods of animal origin. Vegans and vegetarians who eat few dairy foods or eggs are at risk of deficiency, especially as pregnancy and breastfeeding rapidly use 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 B12 supplement.

Although it is added to certain brands of soy milk and meat substitutes the amount in these foods may not be enough if few other sources of B12 are eaten.

If you are concerned please talk to your dietitian or doctor.

See the fact sheet [Healthy vegetarian eating when you're pregnant](#) for more information.

Foods to avoid or limit

As well as limiting fish high in mercury, pregnant women should also be aware of the following food safety issues.

Food-borne infections

Pregnant women are at greater risk of some types of food poisoning and infections that can be passed on to the baby. To reduce your risk:

- Use good food handling practices such as using separate chopping boards for raw and cooked foods.
- Don't leave leftover cooked food on the bench for too long. Place it in the fridge once it has stopped steaming.
- Avoid foods that may contain the listeria bacteria such as sandwich meats, soft cheeses (brie, camembert, ricotta, feta and blue cheese), soft serve ice-cream, pate, pre-prepared salads, smoked salmon, uncooked seafood and pre-cooked prawns. Freshly cooked seafood is safe. Listeria is killed by cooking food to boiling point, so when cooking or reheating foods, make sure they are steaming hot.
- Raw meat and cat poo can carry toxoplasmosis. To reduce your risk of infection; thoroughly cook meat, wear rubber gloves if handling cat litter and wash hands after gardening or handling pets.
- Avoid undercooked eggs and meat to limit risk of salmonella food poisoning, which in rare cases can affect the baby. Cook eggs until yolk and white are firm.

Alcohol

Not drinking alcohol is the safest option.

Caffeine

Tea and coffee contain caffeine. These are safe to drink in moderation, for example, one to two coffees or up to five cups of tea per day. Energy drinks can contain large amounts of caffeine or guarana (a source of caffeine) so should be limited.

Liver and vitamin A

Limit liver to 50g a week as it can contain more than the recommended levels of vitamin A (retinol) for pregnant women.

See the fact sheet [Food Safety During Pregnancy](#) for more information.

How much weight should I gain?

Your recommended weight gain depends on your pre-pregnancy body mass index (BMI). To calculate your BMI divide weight (in kilos) by height (in metres) squared. Check the table below for the recommended weight gain for your BMI range.

If you find you have gained a lot of weight early in pregnancy, aim to slow your weight gain down to the recommended monthly gain.

Dieting is not recommended, instead limit intake of high fat and high sugar foods and do some daily exercise such as walking. Speak to your doctor, midwife or physiotherapist if you are unsure what type of exercise is appropriate for you.

See the fact sheet *Weight gain in pregnancy* for more information and tips on what to eat if you are worried you are gaining too much or too little weight.

Pre-pregnancy	BMI European	BMI Asian	Recommended weight gain during pregnancy	Weight gain per month in 2nd and 3rd trimesters*
Underweight	Less than 18.5		12.5 to 18kg	2 to 2.5kg
Normal weight	18.5–24	18.5 to 22.9	11.5 to 16.0kg	1.5 to 2.2kg
Overweight	25–29	23 to 27.5	7 to 11.5kg	1 to 1.4kg
Obese	30 and above	Above 27.5	5 to 9kg	0.7 to 1.2kg

*The average weight gain in the first three months is 0.5 to 2kg.

Where to get more information

If you have questions about what to eat or weight gain during pregnancy ask for a referral to a dietitian.

The Women's website

For more information on nutrition and pregnancy visit

www.thewomens.org.au/health-information/pregnancy-and-birth/a-healthy-pregnancy

The following fact sheets are also available for download:

- Healthy eating when you're pregnant with twins
- Healthy eating when you're pregnant: Information for vegetarians and vegans
- Coping with common discomforts of pregnancy
- Food safety during pregnancy
- Iron and pregnancy
- Nausea and vomiting in pregnancy (morning sickness)
- Weight gain during pregnancy

Food Standards Australia New Zealand

This website has useful information for consumers. Search for 'Fish and mercury', 'Listeria and food' and 'Food poisoning'

www.foodstandards.gov.au/consumer/

Eat for Health

Visit the Australian Dietary Guidelines website for advice and resources about healthy eating.

www.eatforhealth.gov.au

Healthy foods guide

Use the following table as a guide to foods you should include in your daily diet.

Note: this information is taken from the Australian Dietary Guidelines.

Food group	Daily serves	Each item is an example of a serve
Vegetables & Legumes	5	½ cup vegetables 1 cup salad ½ cup legumes (cooked)
Fruit	2	1 medium or 2 small pieces fruit 1 cup tinned fruit or fruit salad 1 tablespoon dried fruit
Meat and meat alternatives	3 ½	65g cooked meat 80g cooked chicken 100g cooked fish fillet or 1 small can of fish 2 eggs 1 cup legumes canned or cooked legumes/beans - lentils, chickpeas 170g tofu 1 tablespoon (30g) nuts
Dairy or alternatives such as soy or almond milk	2 ½	1 cup milk Small tub (¾ cup) yoghurt 2 slices (40g) cheese
Grain foods (breads & cereals)	8 ½	1 slice bread, ½ bread roll, 1 chapatti, ½ Lebanese bread, 3 crisp breads 1 cup cereal, ½ cup porridge (cooked) ½ cup rice, pasta, noodles (cooked)
Unsaturated oils and spreads	Optional	1 to 2 tablespoons per day

Limit foods that are high in added fats and sugars, such as cakes, biscuits, pastries, high fat takeaway foods and sugar-sweetened soft drinks and juices. While these are fine in small amounts, in large amounts they can cause excess weight gain or take the place of more nutritious foods.