

Healthy eating when you're pregnant

You're pregnant, so this is a good time to review your diet. The food you eat now affects your health, your baby's growth and your baby's future health.

When you're pregnant, you only need to eat a little more food than before. What matters is getting enough of the right nutrients. Nutrients are the parts of food that give you energy and keep you healthy.

You can get most of the nutrients you need by eating regular meals and including foods from all 5 food groups each day. Each group gives your body different nutrients. The food groups are:

- vegetables
- fruit
- grains, like bread, rice and pasta
- dairy foods and plant milks (like soy milk) with added calcium - this is called 'calcium-fortified'
- lean red meat, chicken, fish and eggs, and plant-based alternatives, like tofu, beans, lentils, nuts and seeds.

See the table at the end of the fact sheet for the recommended serves to eat from each food group.

During pregnancy, you also need folic acid, iodine and vitamin D supplements, because it's difficult to get enough from food alone.

We'll explain more on page 3.

Tips to add a variety of foods in your everyday meals

To get the right balance and variety of foods:

- fill half of your plate with vegetables, salad and fruit
- fill a quarter with protein foods, like lean red meat, chicken, soya nuggets, fish, eggs, tofu, tempeh, nuts, paneer, beans and lentils
- fill a quarter with carbohydrate foods, like pasta, quinoa, burghul, semolina, oats, bread, rice, noodles, injera, chapatti, roti and cous cous.



When you make breakfast, lunch and dinner, choose foods from each column: a carbohydrate, a protein and fruit and vegetables.

Carbohydrate	+	Protein	+	Vegetables and fruit
Grain-based foods and starchy vegetables		Dairy foods, eggs, nut butters, fish, tempeh, lentils, beans, lentils, chicken and lean red meat		Colourful vegetables, salads, and fruit

Breakfast ideas

Lunch and dinner ideas

Here are some healthy snack ideas for when you're hungry between meals or can't eat enough at mealtimes.

If you feel sick (nausea)

If nausea affects what you eat, eat what you can manage. When you feel better, return to your usual healthy eating. Read our fact sheet, [Nausea and vomiting in pregnancy](#) (morning sickness), for more information.

Important nutrients during pregnancy

Folic acid (folate)

Folic acid is a vitamin needed to build your baby's cells. In early pregnancy, it can help reduce the risk of some birth defects, like spina bifida.

It's difficult to get enough folate from food alone, so you'll need to take a supplement.

Start taking folic acid when planning your pregnancy and continue for the first 3 months after you're pregnant. Take 500 micrograms every day, either as a folic acid tablet or in a pregnancy multivitamin.

Some people with certain health conditions or a BMI over 30 may need a higher dose.

If you have an MTHFR gene variant that affects how your body uses folate, you can still use regular folic acid. You don't need a special type like 5-MTHF.

Your doctor, midwife or pharmacist can help you choose the right supplement.

Folate can also be found in green leafy vegetables, salad greens, fruit, wholegrain breads and cereals, beans, lentils and nuts. Some breakfast cereals have folate added.

Iodine

Iodine supports your baby's brain and nervous system. During pregnancy and breastfeeding, you need more iodine than usual.

Because it's hard to get enough from food, take a supplement of 150 micrograms every day. Most pregnancy multivitamins contain this dose.

Do not take kelp (seaweed) tablets, as they may have too much iodine. If you have a thyroid condition, speak to your doctor before taking an iodine supplement.

Protein

Protein helps build all body tissues. Try to eat protein at every meal. Good sources include:

- red meat, chicken, fish and eggs
- nuts, beans and lentils
- dairy foods and paneer
- tofu, tempeh, soya nuggets and other soy products.

Iron

Your body needs more iron during pregnancy to make red blood cells for you and your baby. Low iron can make you tired and may increase the risk of premature birth and low birth weight.

Good sources of iron include:

- red meat, chicken and fish
- lentils, beans, nuts and whole grains
- green leafy vegetables.

Iron from plant sources is harder for your body to absorb. Eating vitamin C-rich foods at the same meal, like oranges, berries, tomatoes or capsicum, can help.

If blood tests show you have low iron, you may need to take an iron supplement.

Read our fact sheet, [Iron in pregnancy](#), for more information.

Calcium

Calcium builds healthy bones for you and your baby.

The richest sources of calcium are:

- dairy foods (low fat has the same amount of calcium as full fat)
- fish with edible bones, like canned salmon and sardines
- firm tofu.

You can find smaller amounts of calcium in other foods, but most people get most of their calcium from dairy foods.

If you drink soy, almond or rice milk, check the label. Choose a brand with at least 100mg of calcium per 100ml – about the same as cow's milk.

Aim for 2 to 3 serves of calcium-rich foods each day. If you don't eat dairy foods or calcium-fortified milks, ask your dietitian, midwife, or doctor if you need a calcium supplement.

If you're at risk of high blood pressure (hypertension), your health professional may recommend a calcium supplement even if you already eat calcium-rich food.

Vitamin D

Vitamin D helps your body absorb and use calcium to build your baby's bones.

You get most of your vitamin D from sunlight on your skin and smaller amounts from food like oily fish, egg yolks, margarine and milk.

It can be difficult to get enough vitamin D during pregnancy, so everyone is advised to take a vitamin D supplement of at least 400 international units (IU) every day. Most pregnancy multivitamins will contain this amount.

If you spend a lot of time indoors, have darker skin or cover most of your body in clothing, your vitamin D may be low. Very low vitamin D can cause weak bones and muscle pain in adults and bone problems (called rickets) in babies. If you are at risk, your health professional may suggest you take extra vitamin D.

Talk to your pharmacist to choose a supplement with the right amount for you.

Multivitamin supplements

Taking a daily multivitamin can help you get enough folic acid, vitamin D and iodine if you aren't already taking these separately.

Always check that your supplements are safe for pregnancy. Some multivitamin supplements that aren't made for pregnancy may have too much retinol, a type of vitamin A, which isn't safe when you're pregnant. Beta carotene, another type of vitamin A, is safe.

If you're not sure which supplements to take, ask your pharmacist, doctor or dietitian for advice

If you're vegetarian, vegan or don't eat meat

You can still get the nutrients you and your baby need if you're vegetarian, vegan or you're avoiding animal foods. Make sure your meals include enough protein, iron, calcium and vitamin B12. For more tips, read our fact sheet [Healthy eating when you're pregnant: Information for vegetarians and vegans](#).

Omega-3 fats

Omega-3 fats help your babies brain, nerves and eyes develop and may have other health benefits. Good sources include oily fish like tuna, salmon, sardines and mackerel. These fish are low in mercury and safe to eat during pregnancy. Eat fish 2 to 3 times a week.

Some fish have too much mercury and should be limited during pregnancy:

- shark (flake), marlin, broadbill or swordfish: eat no more than 1 serving every 2 weeks. Don't eat other fish that fortnight.
- orange roughy (deep sea perch) or catfish: 1 serving a week. Don't eat other fish that week.

Plant sources of omega-3 fats include walnuts, chia seeds, linseeds (also called flax seeds) and soybeans.

Omega-3 supplements

Most people have enough omega-3 fats in their blood and don't need a supplement.

Some pregnancy multivitamins contain small amounts (less than 300mg) of omega-3 fats as DHA and EPA. This is enough for most people during pregnancy.

Only take a higher dose of omega-3 fats if your healthcare provider checks your blood and says your omega-3 levels are low.

Foods to avoid or limit

Besides limiting fish high in mercury, you should be aware of other food safety issues during pregnancy. Read our fact sheet, [Food safety in pregnancy](#), for more information.

Alcohol

The safest option is to not drink alcohol at all.

Caffeine

Tea and coffee contain caffeine. You can drink them in moderation, for example, 1 to 2 coffees or up to 5 cups of tea a day. Energy drinks can contain large amounts of caffeine or guarana (a source of caffeine), so limit these.

Liver and vitamin A

Limit liver to 50g a week. It can contain more vitamin A than recommended for pregnant people.

How much weight should you gain?

Your recommended weight gain depends on your pre-pregnancy body mass index (BMI). To calculate your BMI, divide your weight (in kilos) by your height (in metres) squared.

You can also use an online BMI calculator from the Better Health Channel - it will do the calculation for you.

<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/tools/body-mass-index-calculator-for-adult>

Check the table below for the recommended weight gain for your BMI range.

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

Dieting is not recommended during pregnancy. Instead, eat fewer foods that are high in fat and sugar. Be active every day, for example go for a walk, do gentle stretches or seated yoga.

Speak to your doctor, midwife or physiotherapist if you're not sure which exercises are best for you.

Read our fact sheet, [Weight gain during pregnancy](#), for more information and tips on eating well and managing your weight.

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

*The average weight gain in the first 3 months is 0.5 to 2kg.

Source: Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care. (n.d.). Healthy eating when you're pregnant or breastfeeding. Eat For Health. eatforhealth.gov.au/eating-well/healthy-eating-throughout-all-life/healthy-eating-when-you're-pregnant-or-breastfeeding

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

The following fact sheets are also available to download:

- Healthy eating when you're pregnant with twins
thewomens.org.au/health-information/fact-sheets#healthy-eating-when-pregnant-with-twins
- Iron in pregnancy
thewomens.org.au/health-information/fact-sheets#iron-in-pregnancy
- Nausea and vomiting in pregnancy (morning sickness)
[information/fact-sheets#nausea-and-vomiting-in-pregnancy](http://thewomens.org.au/health-information/fact-sheets#nausea-and-vomiting-in-pregnancy)
- Coping with common discomforts of pregnancy
thewomens.org.au/health-information/fact-sheets#coping-common-discomforts-of-pregnancy
- Food safety in pregnancy
thewomens.org.au/health-information/fact-sheets#food-safety-in-pregnancy

- Healthy eating when you're pregnant: Information for vegetarians and vegans
thewomens.org.au/health-information/fact-sheets#healthy-eating-when-youre-pregnant-information-for-vegetarians-and-vegans
- Weight gain in pregnancy
thewomens.org.au/health-information/fact-sheets#weight-gain-during-pregnancy

Food Standards Australia New Zealand

This website has useful information for consumers. Search for 'Fish and mercury', 'Listeria in food' and 'Food poisoning'
foodstandards.gov.au/consumer

Eat for Health

Visit the Australian Dietary Guidelines website for advice and resources about healthy eating when you're pregnant or breastfeeding
eatforhealth.gov.au

Do you need an interpreter?



You can ask for an interpreter if you need one.

Family Violence Support

1800 Respect National Helpline

You can get help if you have experienced sexual assault, domestic or family violence and abuse.

You can call any time of day or night.

1800 737 732

1800respect.org.au

Healthy foods guide during pregnancy

Use this guide to eat a variety of foods and eat more or less depending on your appetite.

Food group	Daily serves	Each item is an example of a serve
Vegetables and legumes (beans, lentils, chickpeas)	5	½ cup vegetables 1 cup salad ½ cup cooked legumes
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 lean red meat 80g cooked chicken 100g cooked fish fillet or 1 small can of fish 2 eggs 1 cup canned or cooked legumes - beans, lentils, chickpeas 170g tofu 1 tablespoon (30g) nuts
Dairy or alternatives	2 ½	1 cup milk (cow, soy, almond) Small tub (¾ cup) yoghurt 2 slices (40g) cheese
Grain foods (breads and 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, like cakes, biscuits, pastries, high fat takeaway foods and sugary drinks and juices.

Small amounts are okay but eating too much can make you gain extra weight or take the place of healthier foods.

Disclaimer: This fact sheet provides general information only. For specific advice about your or your baby's healthcare needs, you should seek advice from your health professional. The Royal Women's Hospital does not accept any responsibility for loss or damage arising from your reliance on this fact sheet instead of seeing a health professional. If you or your baby require urgent medical attention, please contact your nearest emergency department.
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