



The American College of
Obstetricians and Gynecologists



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

FAQ001

PREGNANCY

Nutrition During Pregnancy

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What basic nutrients should every diet include?

Every diet should include proteins, carbohydrates, vitamins, minerals, and fat. Dietary reference intakes (DRIs) are recommended amounts an individual should consume daily of certain nutrients, vitamins, and minerals. During pregnancy, the DRIs are higher for many nutrients.

How much should I eat during pregnancy?

If you are a normal weight before pregnancy, you need only an average of 300 extra calories per day to fuel your baby's growth and keep you healthy during pregnancy—the amount in a glass of skim milk and half a sandwich.

Having healthy snacks that you can eat during the day is a good way to get the nutrients and extra calories you need. You may find it easier to eat snacks and small meals throughout the day rather than three big meals a day.

Do I need any extra nutrients during pregnancy?

Pregnant women need extra iron and folic acid. To get these extra nutrients, a prenatal vitamin supplement is recommended for most women. You should talk to your health care provider before taking a prenatal vitamin supplement because excess amounts of some vitamins or minerals during pregnancy can be harmful.

What is folic acid?

Folic acid is a B vitamin that is also known as folate. Before pregnancy and during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, you need 0.4 milligrams (or 400 micrograms) of folic acid daily in order to reduce the risk of **neural tube defects**. All women of childbearing age should take a multivitamin supplement containing 0.4 milligrams of folic acid a day.

Women who have had a child with a neural tube defect or who are taking certain drugs need much higher doses of folic acid—4 milligrams daily. Women who need 4 milligrams should take folic acid as a separate supplement, not as part of a multivitamin.

What does iron do in the body?

The iron in red blood cells helps carry oxygen to your organs, tissues, and baby. Women need more iron in their diets during pregnancy to support the growth of the baby and to produce extra blood. The recommended daily amount of iron you should consume while pregnant is 27 milligrams, which can be found in most prenatal vitamin supplements. Women who do not have enough iron stored in their bodies before pregnancy may develop **anemia**. Some women may need extra iron in the form of an iron supplement.

How can I plan meals to get the nutrients I need during pregnancy?

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has a food plan called MyPlate (www.choosemyplate.gov). It includes an online interactive diet-planning program called SuperTracker (www.supertracker.usda.gov/default.aspx). This program gives you a personalized plan that includes the kinds of foods in the amounts that you need to eat for each trimester of pregnancy.

How much weight should I gain during pregnancy?

How much weight you gain during pregnancy depends on your weight before pregnancy. Body mass index (BMI) is a measure of body fat based on height and weight. Women with a normal BMI before pregnancy should gain between 25 pounds and 35 pounds during pregnancy.

Can being overweight or obese affect pregnancy?

Overweight and obese women are at increased risk of several pregnancy problems. These problems include **gestational diabetes**, high blood pressure, **preeclampsia**, and cesarean delivery. Babies of overweight and obese mothers also are at greater risk of certain problems, such as **congenital** abnormalities, **macrosomia** with possible birth injury, and childhood obesity. For women with a BMI of 30 or greater, a weight gain of between 11 pounds and 20 pounds is recommended during pregnancy. For women with a BMI of 40 or greater, a modest weight loss during pregnancy may be recommended.

Can consuming caffeine be harmful during pregnancy?

Moderate caffeine intake (200 milligrams per day—the amount in approximately two 8-ounce cups of brewed coffee) does not appear to lead to **miscarriage** or preterm birth. It is not clear whether caffeine increases the risk of having a low birth weight baby.

Excess caffeine can interfere with sleep and contribute to nausea and light-headedness. It also can increase urination and lead to dehydration.

I am a vegetarian. Do I need to change my diet now that I am pregnant?

If you are a vegetarian, you will need to plan your meals with care to ensure you get enough protein. You will probably need to take supplements, especially iron, vitamin B₁₂, and vitamin D.

Should I avoid eating certain fish while pregnant?

Pregnant women should avoid eating shark, swordfish, king mackerel, or tilefish during pregnancy because these large fish contain high levels of a form of mercury that can be harmful to the developing fetus. Common types of fish that are low in mercury are shrimp, canned light tuna (not albacore, which has a higher mercury content), salmon, pollock, and catfish. You can safely eat up to 12 ounces (about two meals) of these fish per week while you are pregnant.

What is listeriosis and how can it affect pregnancy?

Listeriosis is an illness caused by bacteria that can occur in unpasteurized milk and soft cheese and prepared and uncooked meats, poultry, and shellfish. When a pregnant woman is infected, the disease can cause miscarriage or **stillbirth**.

To prevent listeriosis, wash all fresh fruits and vegetables before using them. While you are pregnant, do not eat the following foods:

- Unpasteurized milk or soft cheeses
- Raw or undercooked meat, poultry, or shellfish
- Prepared meats, such as hot dogs or deli meats, unless they are heated until steaming hot

What is pica?

During pregnancy, some women feel strong urges to eat nonfood items such as clay, ice, laundry starch, or cornstarch. This condition is called **pica**. Pica can be harmful to your pregnancy. It can affect your intake of nutrients and can lead to constipation and anemia. Talk with your health care provider if you have any of these urges.

Glossary

Anemia: Abnormally low levels of blood or red blood cells in the bloodstream. Most cases are caused by iron deficiency, or lack of iron.

Congenital: Refers to a condition that is present in a baby when it is born.

Gestational Diabetes: Diabetes that arises during pregnancy.

Macrosomia: A condition in which a fetus grows very large.

Miscarriage: Early pregnancy loss.

Neural Tube Defect: A birth defect that results from incomplete development of the brain, spinal cord, or their coverings.

Pica: The urge to eat nonfood items.

Preeclampsia: A condition of pregnancy in which there is high blood pressure and protein in the urine.

Stillbirth: Delivery of a baby that shows no sign of life.

If you have further questions, contact your obstetrician–gynecologist.

FAQ001: Designed as an aid to patients, this document sets forth current information and opinions related to women's health. The information does not dictate an exclusive course of treatment or procedure to be followed and should not be construed as excluding other acceptable methods of practice. Variations, taking into account the needs of the individual patient, resources, and limitations unique to institution or type of practice, may be appropriate.

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