

Eating Whilst Pregnant - A Guide Through the Minefield

When you are pregnant there is lots of advice on what you should and shouldn't be eating. This guide is designed to help you sift out the facts from the old wives tales.

It is important to eat a balanced diet whilst pregnant to make sure your baby gets all the nutrients it needs. It should also give you the energy you require to care for your growing baby.

You should try to eat:

- * Plenty of fruit and vegetables (aim for 5 portions a day) these can be fresh, tinned, dried, frozen or in juice.
- * Plenty of starchy foods such as bread, pasta, rice and potatoes - try to choose wholegrain options
- * Foods rich in protein such as lean meat and chicken, fish (aim for at least two servings of fish a week, including one of oily fish), eggs and pulses (such as beans and lentils). These foods are also good sources of iron.
- * Plenty of fibre. This helps prevent constipation and is found in wholegrain bread, pasta, rice, pulses and fruit and vegetables
- * Dairy foods such as milk, cheese and yogurt, which contain calcium to help growing bones

Vitamins and Minerals:

* Folic Acid - Folic acid has been shown to reduce the risk of neural tube defects such as spina bifida. Ideally you should take a daily 400 microgram (mcg) Folic Acid Supplement from the time you start trying to conceive until the end of your first trimester (12 weeks). However if you haven't been taking it start when you find out you are pregnant. You should also eat foods containing folate - the natural form of folic acid - such as green vegetables and brown rice, fortified bread and breakfast cereals.

* Iron - Pregnant women can become deficient in Iron so make sure you eat lots of iron rich foods such as red meat, pulses, green vegetables, bread and fortified breakfast cereals. Try to have some Vitamin C (found in fruit juices, and fruit and vegetables) at the same time to help your body absorb the Iron. If your blood iron levels become low your midwife will recommend some iron supplements. (Note: Although liver contains Iron it is best avoided during pregnancy - see below - What to Avoid)

* Vitamin D - Vitamin D is found in a small number of foods but we get most of our Vitamin D from the summer sunlight. If you are not spending much time out in the sun it is worth taking a 10mcg supplement daily. (Note: If you are out in the sun take care not to burn)

* Vitamin A - Avoid supplements containing Vitamin A as too much is harmful to your unborn baby. (See below – What to Avoid.)

What to Avoid:

There are some foods it is best to avoid during pregnancy because they may make you ill or could harm your baby.

* Some Cheeses - You should avoid soft, ripened cheeses such as Brie, Camembert and blue veined cheese such as Stilton. You should also avoid cheeses marked as 'unpasteurised'. These cheeses may contain a bacteria called Listeria which may harm your unborn baby.

* Pate - Pate could also contain Listeria so should be avoided

* Eggs - Avoid raw egg and food containing raw or partially cooked eggs. This is because of the risk of salmonella which can cause food poisoning. It is OK to eat eggs which are cooked through so both the white and yolk of the egg is solid.

* Meat - Avoid raw or undercooked meat. Make sure all meat you eat is cooked right through so it is piping hot and no pink meat is left. This is especially important with poultry and food containing minced meat like burgers and sausages. This is because raw and undercooked meat might contain bacteria which could cause food poisoning. Also make sure you wash your hands after dealing with raw meat and all raw meat is kept away from food ready to eat.

* Liver and Vitamin A supplements - You need some vitamin A, but having too much means that levels could build up and may harm your unborn baby. Ask your GP or midwife if you want more information.

* Some types of Fish - Fish is good for you and your baby and shouldn't be avoided all together however it is not recommended you eat Shark, Marlin and Swordfish because the high levels of mercury they contain could damage the baby's nervous system. For this reason also you should limit your Tuna intake to a maximum of 2 tuna steaks or 2 medium sized cans per week. Also have no more than two portions of oily fish a week. Oily fish includes fresh tuna (not canned tuna, which does not count as oily fish), mackerel, sardines and trout.

* Raw Shellfish - Avoid raw and undercooked shellfish as it may contain bacteria which may cause food poisoning.

Peanuts:

Serious allergies to nuts and nut products and some seeds affect about 1 to 2% of people in the UK. Your baby may be at higher risk of developing a nut allergy if you, the baby's father, brothers or sisters have certain allergic conditions such as hay-fever, asthma and/or eczema.

If your baby is in this higher-risk group, you may wish to avoid eating peanuts and peanut products when you're pregnant and breastfeeding.

Alcohol and Caffeine:

Opinions vary on how much, if any, alcohol is safe to drink whilst pregnant. The Food Standards Agency recommend you limit your alcohol intake to 1-2 units once or twice a week.

Caffeine should also be limited although it isn't necessary to cut it out completely. It is important not to drink more than 300mg a day as high levels of Caffeine can cause babies with low birth rates and even miscarriage.

Each of these contains roughly 300mg of caffeine:

- 3 mugs of instant coffee (100mg each)
- 4 cups of instant coffee (75mg each)
- 3 cups of brewed coffee (100mg each)
- 6 cups of tea (50mg each)
- 8 cans of cola (up to 40mg each)
- 4 cans of 'energy' drink (up to 80mg each)
- 8 (50g) bars of plain chocolate (up to 50mg each). Caffeine in milk chocolate is about half that of plain chocolate

Remember Caffeine is also found in some cold and flu remedies so always check with your GP or pharmacist before taking anything.

Foods you DON'T have to avoid (dispelling the myths):

It is OK to eat the following:

- * Shellfish, including prawns - as long as they are part of a hot meal and have been properly cooked
- * Live or bio yogurt
- * Pro-biotic drinks
- * Fromage frais
- * Crème fraîche
- * Soured cream
- * Spicy food
- * Mayonnaise, ice cream, salad dressing - as long as they haven't been made using raw egg. Generally, mayonnaise, ice cream and salad dressing you buy in shops will have been made with pasteurised egg, which means it's safe to eat. But it's better to avoid home-made versions if they contain raw egg. You should also avoid soft ice-cream (more commonly known as Mr Whippy) from machines as it's possible that the pipes in the machine can harbour bacteria if not cleaned correctly. If you're not sure about any of these foods when you're eating out, ask staff for more information
- * Honey - it's fine for pregnant women but honey isn't suitable for babies under a year old
- * Many types of cheese including:
 - Hard cheese, such as Cheddar and Parmesan
 - Feta
 - Ricotta
 - Mascarpone
 - Cream cheese
 - Mozzarella
 - Cottage cheese
 - Processed cheese, such as cheese spreads

About the Author

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