



Pre Pregnancy Nutrition



Strong
for
Everyday



Making the decision to have a baby is an exciting time and is likely to lead to reflection about many areas of your life.

Your diet and lifestyle prior to getting pregnant is particularly important for optimising your own health, your fertility and, for the health of the baby once you are pregnant.

It is worth noting that from conception to 12 weeks of pregnancy, there is absolute reliance on the innate nutritional status of the mother before the placenta forms. Often women are not even aware they are pregnant for some of this time so being aware of this key information and putting these recommendations into place beforehand can help prepare your body for what lies ahead.

The topics discussed here cover the following areas:

- A healthy weight
- Nutrients for pregnancy
- Alcohol and caffeine
- Male fertility



A healthy weight -

being underweight or overweight can affect your chances of becoming pregnant.

Women who have too little body fat are more likely to have irregular or no periods which may affect the ability to conceive. If you have suffered from or are suffering from an eating disorder, trying to gain weight may be difficult to manage. Discussion with your GP and, potentially, with a mental health professional may help you to cope with these challenges.

There are significant links between obesity and infertility in both sexes. A BMI over 30 in women has been shown to affect fertility, with a high body fat potentially affecting ability to ovulate. Achievement of some weight loss may improve your chances of getting pregnant and the best way is through a healthy diet and lifestyle which includes some regular physical activity.

Very low calorie, fad diets or those that exclude a wide variety of foods or a whole food group should be avoided as they can result in low intakes of certain nutrients. Losing weight while pregnant is not recommended so it's best to achieve a healthy weight prior to becoming pregnant.



Nutrients for pre-pregnancy

The basis for good nutrition is a healthy and varied diet. The focus is on starchy foods, lean meat, fish and other protein sources, dairy and plenty of fruit and vegetables.

The government guidelines for calorie intake is 2000kcal per day with a dietary macronutrient split of 50-55% Carbohydrate, 10-15% Protein and 30-35% Fat. This is a general guideline for all healthy women between the ages of 19 and 64. This does change during pregnancy and we will look at this in the next fact sheet.

Individual's nutritional status may differ and these could be looked at on a one-to-one basis with a Nutritionist or Nutritional Therapist where your individual health history, diet and lifestyle would be reviewed.



Macronutrients



CARBOHYDRATES



PROTEIN



FATS

Carbohydrates

Carbohydrates should ideally be whole grains to minimise impact on your blood sugar levels and to provide both micronutrients (vitamins and minerals) and to support your fibre intake.

Sources include:

Oats

Brown Rice

White Potatoes

Sweet Potatoes

Cous Cous

Fruits and Vegetables



Protein



Protein should come from lean sources.

Aim to consume one to two 2 portions per week (one portion = 140g cooked weight) preferably of oily fish to ensure you are consuming Omega 3 fats to support both your and the baby's brain and eye health. Aim not to exceed two portions to minimise your intake of mercury and plastics.

Other sources include:

Poultry

Red Meat

Eggs

Beans

Lentils

Cheese



Fat

Fat intake should primarily come from mono and polyunsaturated fats with a round 10% coming from saturated fats. Avoid trans fats.

Monounsaturated	Avocados, olives, olive oil, rapeseed oil, almonds, cashews, hazelnuts, peanuts, pistachios and spreads made from these nuts.
Polyunsaturated	Oily fish, corn oil, sesame oil, soya oil, and spreads made from these oils. Flaxseed, pinenuts, sesame seeds and walnuts.
Saturated	Processed meats like sausages, ham and burgers, Fatty meats, hard cheeses. Whole milk and cream, butter, lard, ghee, suet, palm and coconut oil.
Trans	Fried foods, takeaways, snacks like biscuits and cakes or pastries. Hard margarines.



Micronutrients

Folic Acid

This should be taken as a supplement both before and during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy. This extra Folic Acid (for most women a dose of 400 micrograms per day is recommended) reduces the risk of neural tube defect in the baby (a problem affecting the baby's spine and neural tubes e.g. spina bifida).

If a family history of neural tube defects is present or you are taking anti-epileptic medication or you are diabetic speak to your GP as you may need a higher dose.



Micronutrients

Vitamin D

It is estimated that one in 4 women has lower than recommended levels of vitamin D. This is particularly an issue in Northern hemisphere countries where sun exposure is lower. Vitamin D works with calcium and vitamin K to support healthy bone formation for both you and for your baby.

The majority of vitamin D is formed when sunlight converts the inactive form in our bodies to the active form. Exposing our skin to daylight is, therefore, important where possible. Ten minutes can be enough for this reaction to take place and it is preferable to do this without a sun protection factor so it could be a walk with your hands visible or your sleeves rolled up. However, be careful not to burn if you are in direct sunlight.

If you are darker skinned or have very little exposure to daylight you may be at risk of a low vitamin D status. There are only a few sources of vitamin D-rich foods for example oily fish (such as salmon, trout, mackerel, sardines, pilchards and herring), eggs and some fortified breakfast cereals and fat spreads. It may be worth considering a vitamin D supplement containing 10 micrograms per day particularly in the winter months when exposure to sunlight is low.

Vitamin D testing is available from your GP and from Nutritionists and Nutritional Therapists.



Micronutrients

Fish

As noted above, portions of fish should be limited to 2 per week. If you are trying to get pregnant or already are, avoid eating shark, swordfish and marlin and avoid eating more than two fresh tuna steaks or four tins of tuna per week. These larger fish can contain more mercury than other kinds of fish.

Iron

Women in pregnancy commonly develop iron deficiency due to the increased demand in the development of a strong blood supply for the baby.

Aim to build up your iron stores in the pre-pregnancy stage by eating iron-rich foods as part of your balanced diet. These include red meat, poultry and fish. Some plant foods such as beans, dark green leafy vegetables, nuts and whole grains also contain iron but this form is not as well absorbed by the body as that from animal sources. Vitamin C can aid this absorption so aim to consume these foods with an additional source such as peppers, tomatoes or a glass of orange juice.

Avoid drinking tea with any source of iron as this may impair its absorption.



Caffeine and Alcohol

The Department of Health updated their guidelines on alcohol consumption in 2016 and recommends that if you are planning a pregnancy or are pregnant the safest approach is not to drink alcohol at all. This minimises the risks to your baby.

This reflects the advice from the Chief Scientific Officer which also states that drinking during pregnancy can lead to long-term harm to the baby, with the more you drink, the greater the risks.

It is recommended that caffeine intake is minimised, Caffeine is found in coffee and tea, chocolate, sports/energy drinks and in some cold and flu remedies. The overall daily limit should be no more than 200mg a day from any source. This equates roughly to:

- Two mugs of instant coffee (100mg each)
- One and a half mugs of filter coffee (140mg each)
- Two and a half mugs of tea (75mg each)

A standard bar of dark chocolate contains around 50mg caffeine, a can of energy drink around 80mg of caffeine and a can of cola around 40mg of caffeine.

Coffee from a coffee shop or restaurant may contain higher levels than the coffee you make at home.



Male Fertility

Men should consider changes to their diet and lifestyle when trying for a baby too. Both diet and lifestyle can affect male fertility. Focusing on weight management, eating a healthy varied diet and reducing alcohol can improve sperm quality and increase the chances of conception.



A Healthy Weight

Decline in semen quality and male reproductive potential over the last 50 years have occurred in parallel with increasing obesity. Losing some weight with the aim of achieving a healthy BMI (18.5 to 25) and increasing your activity levels may help chances of conception and will be beneficial to overall health.

A Healthy Balanced Diet

This is just as important for men and follows the same principles as discussed for women when it comes to Carbohydrate, Protein and Fat. Energy intake for the average male aged 19 to 64 is recommended to be 2500kcal.

There are certain specific nutrients know to be important for male fertility:



Nutrients for Men

Selenium

This is required for healthy sperm and is found in brazil nuts, fish, meat and eggs.

Zinc

Low levels of zinc have been associated with decreased testosterone levels. Foods containing zinc include meat, shellfish, nuts and whole grains.

Alcohol

Excess alcohol can affect sperm quality. Men should aim to drink no more than 14 units of alcohol per week preferably spread over three or more days. One unit is equivalent to:

- Half a pint of normal strength lager
- A small glass of wine
- 25ml measure of spirits

Smoking

Smoking has been linked to low sperm count and to poor sperm motility and it is recommended that you quit smoking if you are trying to conceive.

