



Healthy eating when trying to become pregnant



Health



Wellness



Nutrition



Support

Introduction

Nutrition plays an important role during pregnancy and our nutritional needs change at different stage. This booklet is part of a series to provide support at each stage of the journey.

Please be aware these booklets are given as guidance. Nutritional advice can be subject to change and any advice given by your midwife or a medical health professional should always be followed.

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Prenatal nutrition

Eating a balanced and varied diet is always important, but there are particularly key benefits when trying to get pregnant. The food you eat can affect your health, fertility and the chances of a successful pregnancy that's free from complications.

When trying for a baby, advice about what to eat and drink is the same as for any other adult, and it's recommended to follow the UK guidelines as much as possible. However, there are also some ways that women can increase their chances of having a baby through diet and lifestyle changes.

And it's not about women... men should also eat a healthier diet to help increase fertility. It's also important that partners and anyone supporting the mother are in good health to provide support.

Folic acid

It's essential to take a folic acid supplement before pregnancy to ensure levels are high enough for the initial development stages of the baby and to prevent neural tube defects and a particular type of anaemia. A daily dose of 400µg (micrograms) is recommended.

Folic acid is an important supplement to continue to take until the 12th week of pregnancy (the end of your first trimester). Good sources of folic acid should also be included in a healthy diet.

Foods high in folic acid include:

- broccoli
- green leafy vegetables (e.g. spinach, kale and cabbage)
- wholegrains
- beans
- oranges
- folic acid fortified products

Vitamin D

Here in the UK, we struggle to get our recommended intake of Vitamin D. That's because most adults make most of their Vitamin D through the action of sunlight on the skin, however the sun in the UK is only strong enough for this to happen in the summer months. Between October and March you should therefore consider taking a daily Vitamin D supplement.

Women who are at particular risk of low Vitamin D levels include those who have darker skin, those who spend lots of time indoors, or those who cover their skin with clothing.

It's useful for all adults (including anybody trying to get pregnant) to take a daily 10µg Vitamin D supplement. This helps with bone development as we struggle to get enough through food.

Vitamin D helps your body absorb calcium from your diet, which is particularly important for the growth and development of your baby's bones and helps to maintain the health of your bones too.

Some foods including oily fish, eggs, red meat and fortified foods contain small amounts of Vitamin D, but it would be difficult to get the amount you need from food alone.

Vitamin A

Vitamin A is important for good health and for the healthy development of your baby, but you should avoid large amounts. You should not take any supplements containing Vitamin A or retinol. Be careful with multivitamin supplements which may contain these, and fish liver oil supplements (e.g) cod liver oil. You should limit eating liver and liver products, such as pâté, because they are very high in Vitamin A.

Iron

The body needs extra iron to ensure your baby has enough blood supply and receives the necessary oxygen and nutrients. Iron deficiency anaemia can affect your muscle function, your ability to be active (with tasks such climbing the stairs), and your gut function.

In pregnancy, iron deficiency also increases the risk of having a low birth weight baby and a premature delivery. After giving birth, iron deficiency anaemia can also affect you by causing tiredness and reducing your milk production. It's also associated with postnatal depression.

High iron foods include:

- Dried fruit (e.g. apricots)
- Fortified foods (e.g. breakfast cereals)
- Red meat (e.g. beef and lamb)
- Beans and other pulses
- Dark leafy green vegetables
- Wholemeal bread

Tip: Choose higher fibre foods such as wholegrains, leave the skin on fruit and veg and add beans and pulses to meals.

Vitamin C helps your body absorb the iron. Creating meals that are high in iron and Vitamin C is therefore useful. For example, have a glass of orange juice with beans on toast. On the other hand, tea or coffee can decrease the amount of iron your body absorbs, so try not to drink these at mealtimes.

Alcohol

Quite simply, the safest approach is to completely avoid alcohol when trying to conceive. Alcohol is a toxin and you're likely to have better success in getting pregnant when you avoid it. There is support available if you need help with alcohol. Search online for 'Wigan Alcohol Support' for more information.

Caffeine

High amounts of caffeine can impact fertility and increase the risk of a low birth weight baby, so it's sensible for women who are trying to conceive to limit their intake to 200mg a day (the same as recommended during pregnancy). This is the equivalent of two cups of freshly brewed coffee or instant coffee, or three cups of tea. Decaffeinated coffee and tea are lower in caffeine but not completely caffeine-free, so check before you drink.

Caffeine is also found in chocolate, cola and energy drinks. An average bar of dark chocolate contains around 50mg, an energy drink around 80 mg, and a can of cola around 40 mg. There are lots of hot drinks available (such as rooibos or herbal teas) that may satisfy your need for a hot drink.

Advice for men

Men should consider changes to their diet and lifestyle when trying for a baby too, as diet can affect male fertility. Eating a healthy, varied diet and reducing alcohol intake can improve sperm quality and increase the chances of you and your partner having a baby. There are some nutrients that are known to improve fertility in men:

Selenium and zinc

Selenium is needed to make healthy sperm and zinc is linked to testosterone levels. Foods such as Brazil nuts, fish, meat and eggs provide selenium. Foods such as meat, shellfish such as crab, nuts and wholegrains provide zinc.

Alcohol

Excess alcohol can affect sperm quality. Reducing alcohol volume can help increase the chances of having a baby.

Smoking

Other lifestyle factors, such as smoking, can also influence fertility. Smoking has been linked to low sperm count and the movement and swimming of sperm, and it's recommended that you should quit smoking if trying for a baby.

Stop Smoking support is available across Wigan Borough from our Be Well Stop Smoking Service.

Our friendly health advisors can help you with:

- Face-to-face, 1-2-1 appointments
- In-person sessions at community venues
- Telephone appointments & video calls
- Nicotine replacement therapy (NRT)

If you'd like more information, please call 01942 828535 or check out our website: www.bewellwigan.org/stopsmoking.

Although nutrition is important when it comes to fertility, many other factors impact fertility such as genetics, medical conditions, smoking, stress, physical activity and other lifestyle factors.

Around one in seven couples struggle to when trying to have a baby. If you're worried or want some more advice, you can ask for help from your GP and, depending on the situation, a fertility specialist.

More information about fertility issues can be found on the NHS website: www.nhs.uk/conditions/infertility.

The Foodwise in Pregnancy app

The Foodwise in Pregnancy app has useful information on eating well, keeping active and achieving health weight gain in pregnancy. There are six sections to work through at your own pace, including interactive games, quizzes and tools. It also features:

- Tips and advice for achieving a healthy diet
- Practical ideas for keeping active
- Recipes, shopping tips and a meal planner
- Step-by-step exercises ideal for pregnancy

The app is free to download for iPhone and Android. Just search 'Foodwise in Pregnancy' in your usual app store.

Find out more

For all other information on healthy eating during pregnancy, speak to your midwife who will be able to advise you further, or visit the links below:

First Steps Nutrition Trust

www.firststepsnutrition.org/eating-well-early-years

Wigan Council Ante Natal Support

www.wigan.gov.uk/Resident/Health-Social-Care/Children-and-young-people/Health-and-wellbeing/Early-Years.aspx

NHS Ante Natal Support

www.nhs.uk/antenatal-information

Family Hubs

www.wigan.gov.uk/Resident/Education/Family-Hubs/index.aspx

If you would like to learn more or require more information and support, please get in touch!

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