



11 pregnancy diet and nutrition essentials

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During pregnancy diet is of the utmost importance, both for you to be healthy and for your baby to get all the nutrition he needs to develop. This article investigates some of the essentials of pregnancy diet and nutrition that will help you work towards a healthy pregnancy.

1. Eat a healthy varied diet during pregnancy

The best way to get everything you and your baby need during pregnancy is by eating a varied, healthy diet. This way you will be able to get the majority of the vitamins, minerals and nutrients required. However there are some of special importance, that won't be possible to get from your diet, such as folic acid.



2. Advice from the HSE IrelandThe HSE (Health & Safety Executive) in Ireland advises that pregnant women should follow the eating pattern of the food pyramid. Did you know that under 50% of pregnant women meet these recommendations, for individual food pyramid groups? This was demonstrated in a research study in 2011. In fact under 1% of our entire population meet these requirements across all groups.

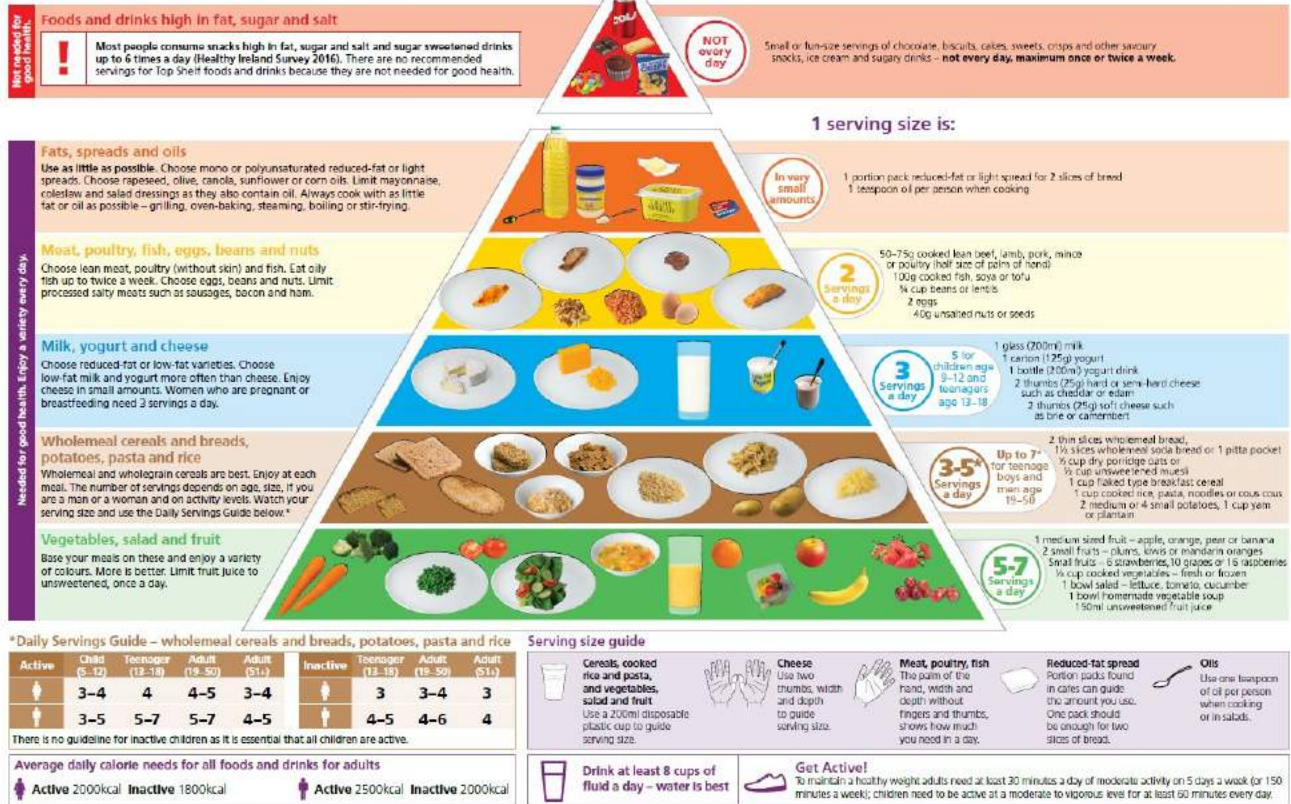
In Ireland, we have a tendency to over consume the foods which lie at the top of the food pyramid, and under consume fruit and vegetables.

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The Food Pyramid

For adults, teenagers and children aged five and over

www.healthyireland.ie



Here is a summary of the Food Pyramid guidelines:

Starchy carbohydrates: breads, pasta, rice, cereals, potatoes, wholegrains 1 serving = 1 slice of bread, 1 bowl of cereal, 1 medium potato

Recommended per day: 6 servings

Fruit and vegetables: includes all fruits and vegetables – exception being potatoes which fall into starchy carbohydrates 1 serving = 1 medium sized piece of fruit, vegetables 3 dessert spoons

Recommended per day: Minimum 5 servings

Dairy foods: milk, yoghurt & cheese 1 serving = 200ml glass of milk, 25g cheese, 125g of yoghurt

Recommended per day: 3 servings

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Protein: fish, poultry, meat, legumes, eggs
1 serving = 2 to 3 oz cooked meat (50-75g), 2 eggs, 4 oz fish (100g), 6 dessert spoons legumes

Recommended per day: Minimum 2 servings

Fats and oils: intake in small amounts
1 serving = Spread such as margarine – 1 heaped teaspoon, olive or rapeseed oil for cooking – 1 teaspoon per person

Recommended per day: 2 servings

Foods which are high in sugar and/or fat should be avoided

(Photo credit of Food Pyramid: HSE Ireland)

3. Pregnancy nutrition recommendations

The guidelines according to the HSE for food intake are much the same in pregnancy, according to the Food Pyramid, as above. The main differences are that women need to follow the folic acid advice, below, and pay particular importance to the following, also explained below:

Folic acid
Vitamin D
Omega-3s
Iron
Calcium
All of these are especially important nutrients in pregnancy.

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4. Folic acid during pregnancy

Although it's best to get nutrition from the food that you eat, you will need to take a folic acid supplement. You should take this when you start planning to become pregnant. In 2015, in the Irish Times, there was an article with the headline – Women urged to take folic acid before conceiving to avoid defects – which features Prof. Michael Turner, Professor of Obstetrics, UCD, who said the following:

"The message for women is that you shouldn't wait until you are pregnant to take folic acid. Any woman who could get pregnant should be taking it."

The daily requirement for folic acid, that you will need to take as a supplement is 400 mcg. We have a fuller feature about folic acid in pregnancy, where you learn more about the benefits of folic acid, those who fall into higher risk groups of having a deficiency and what are the potential issues when there is a deficiency.

Folic acid is vital to prevent neural tube defects, which can include spina bifida. You should take the daily requirement as a supplement of 400mcg of folic acid, each day while you are trying to conceive, and then continue taking it until you are 12 weeks into your pregnancy.

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Around the time of conception, having the required levels of folic acid in your system reduce the risk of your baby being born with neural tube defects.

If your pregnancy wasn't planned, or you weren't aware of the importance of folic acid, then start taking it as soon as possible.

There are also foods that contain folate (folic acid in its natural form), such as brown rice and green leafy vegetables, as well as some cereals and margarines which have been fortified with folic acid. You can also read more about this in our folic acid during pregnancy feature.

5. Vitamin D in pregnancy

A 2011 UCD medical study found that Irish pregnant women have a vitamin D intake that is 80% below the recommended dietary intake levels. Our bodies make vitamin D from sunshine, hence its nickname the Sunshine Vitamin.

The recommended intake for pregnant women in Ireland is currently 1.9 – 2.1µg/d, which you will need to take as a supplement to ensure that you get the required intake.

Vitamin D – what you need it for
In order to absorb calcium from your food, vitamin D is required. Some good sources are oily fish such as herring, sardines and mackerel, and also egg yolks. Healthy amounts of sunlight enables your body to produce vitamin D.

Certain fish should be avoided during pregnancy, these include:
Raw shellfish
Fish that contain high levels of mercury – marlin, swordfish and shark
Tuna – should be limited to 4 tins per week, or 2 tuna steaks each week

6. Fish and omega fats

Particularly important for your baby's developing brain are omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids.

You can find these in:

- Oily fish such as sardines, herring, salmon, mackerel, sardines and trout
- White fish like plaice, cod, plaice and whiting
- They are also present in some vegetable oils such as canola, rapeseed, walnut, flax seed and linseed.

When pregnant, ideally you should eat two portions of fish every week, one of which should be oily.

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7. Iron



During pregnancy iron is required to produce new blood cells in your developing baby. Even before pregnancy lots of women are iron deficient, often without realising it.

You quite likely already know that the top source of iron is lean red meat. Chicken and turkey are other beneficial sources of iron, particularly the darker parts of the meat. Oily fish are another iron source.

Additionally iron can be found in beans, eggs, lentils, green vegetables, dried fruit, wholegrain bread, peas and some breakfast cereals. You can also boost the absorption of iron by accompanying your food with a glass of fruit juice, salad, citrus fruits or vegetables.

8. Calcium

Calcium is another vital part of your pregnancy diet, as well as in your life in general. It is central in the growth of your baby's developing bones. When pregnant you should consume 5 servings of calcium per day.

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Calcium is found in dairy foods such as cheese, milk and yoghurt. One serving consists of a carton of yoghurt, a glass of milk or a chunk of cheese, around the size of a matchbox. You should however avoid unpasteurised products. The reason for this is they carry the risk of Listeria food poisoning.

You can also find calcium in green leafy vegetables, nuts, soya products, tinned fish such as sardines and salmon – when you can eat the bones, and calcium enriched products, such as cereals, breads and juice drinks.

9. Vitamin C pregnancy diet and nutrition

Vitamin C helps to protect the cells and keep them healthy. Once your varied, balanced diet contains fruit and vegetables, you will be getting Vitamin C. Particularly important are:

– broccoli– citrus fruits– tomatoes– bell peppers– blackcurrants

10. Iodine

Iodine is essential for your baby's developing nervous system and brain, as well as regulating his metabolism. For Mum, iodine plays a central role in regulating your thyroid gland. Follow this link to read up about iodine during pregnancy.

11. Things that you should be extra mindful of during pregnancy:

Vitamin A

Don't eat liver when pregnant or take fish liver oil, either naturally or as a supplement. This contains vitamin A.

AlcoholAvoid alcohol entirely during pregnancy. We are aware that there is mixed press around this issue, however ideally alcohol is best avoided when pregnant. Find out more in our articles about alcohol during pregnancy and fetal alcohol syndrome.

CaffeineCaffeine is found in more places than coffee alone, and it should be consumed in very moderate amounts during pregnancy. Check the examples below, and if you are a lover of caffeine, you will need to reduce your intake to less than 200mg per day. Caffeine is present in coffee, tea, coke and chocolate. Be careful as it is also present in some cold and flu remedies.

* 100mg mug of instant coffee* 140mg – mug of filter coffee* 75mg – mug of tea* 40mg – can of cola* 50mg – 50g bar of plain chocolate

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Raw shellfishYou need to avoid eating raw shellfish, as it can contain viruses or bacteria which can result in food poisoning. If cooked thoroughly, it's safe to eat. If you're eating out don't take the risk, as you can only be sure that it is thoroughly cooked if you cook it yourself.

AllergiesAs your body changes during pregnancy, so can its reactions. For example some women will have diabetes for the first time in their life, which is called gestational diabetes.

So much in the same way, there are some guidelines which recommend that women avoid eating peanuts when pregnant. The evidence is not entirely conclusive, however it is better to err on the side of caution. This becomes even more so the case if there is a family medical history of asthma, eczema and/or other atopic diseases.

Eating fresh foodEating food that is freshly cooked and thoroughly-washed is important. On one hand your body is getting nutrients in their freshest form, but on the other hand you need to be vigilant that this fresh food is very well washed.

Cook food thoroughly – this kills the Listeria bacteria.When eating out or ordering food in, ensure that the food is thoroughly cooked. If in doubt, send it back to be cooked more. Food should be piping hot – check the dish to ensure that it is, not only on the top but all the way through. The same applies to home cooked food, as well.

If you are eating smoked fish like smoked salmon, pre cooked chilled meats, cured meats and smoked meats – you only do so if they have been re-heated thoroughly or home-cooked.

Other foods you should avoid during pregnancy:Soft cheeses which have undergone a mould ripening process – examples of these are Camembert, Brie, Danish blue, Stilton

Paté which has been made from fish, meat or vegetables. You can eat tinned paté.

Avoid pre-packed and ready-to-eat foods. Some examples of these are coleslaws, pre-packed salads and deli ready-to-eat foods.

Don't eat raw or under cooked eggs – if you do, your risk getting Salmonella food poisoning.

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