

Women's Healthcare of Illinois

Obstetrics, Gynecology, & Urogynecology

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Pregnancy: Diet & Nutrition

Eating Safely in Pregnancy

During pregnancy, you can eat the same things that you normally eat when you were not pregnant. However, in the first few months of your pregnancy your baby can be hurt by toxins or bacteria. For this reason, you need to be aware of these food dangers and learn how to choose and prepare your food safely.

What foods may be harmful to my baby during pregnancy?

The foods of most concern are fish, meat, milk, and cheese. Because these are important parts of most diets, you will want to learn to choose the right kinds and prepare them appropriately.

What are the foods I should avoid during pregnancy?

Raw Meat: Uncooked seafood and rare or undercooked beef or poultry should be avoided because of the risk of contamination with coliform bacteria, toxoplasmosis, and salmonella.



Deli Meat: Deli meats have been known to be contaminated with listeria, which can cause miscarriage. Listeria has the ability to cross the placenta and may infect the baby leading to infection or blood poisoning, which may be life-threatening. If you are pregnant and you are considering eating deli meats, make certain that you reheat the meat until it is steaming.

Fish with Mercury: Fish that contain high levels of mercury should be avoided. Mercury consumed during pregnancy has been linked to developmental delays and brain damage. Please see [Mercury in Fish](#) for further information specific types of fish.

Smoked Seafood: Refrigerated, smoked seafood often labeled as lox, nova style, kippered, or jerky should be avoided because it could be contaminated with Listeria. (These are safe to eat when they are in an ingredient in a meal that has been cooked, like a casserole.) This type of fish is often found in the deli section of your grocery store. Canned or shelf-safe smoked seafood is usually OK to eat.

Fish Exposed to Industrial Pollutants: Avoid fish from contaminated lakes and rivers that may be exposed to high levels of polychlorinated biphenyls. This is primarily for those who fish in local lakes and streams. These fish include: bluefish, striped bass, salmon, pike, trout, and walleye. Contact the local health department or Environmental Protection Agency to determine which fish are safe to eat in your area. Remember, this is regarding fish caught in local waters and not fish from your local grocery store.



Raw Shellfish: The majority of seafood-borne illness is caused by undercooked shellfish, which include oysters, clams, and mussels. Cooking helps prevent some types of infection, but it does not prevent the algae-related infections that are associated with red tides. Raw shellfish pose a concern for everybody, and they should be avoided altogether during pregnancy.

Raw Eggs: Raw eggs or any foods that contain raw eggs should be avoided because of the potential exposure to salmonella. Some homemade Caesar dressings, mayonnaise, homemade ice cream or custards, and Hollandaise sauces may be made with raw eggs. If the recipe is cooked at some point, this will reduce the exposure to salmonella. Commercially manufactured ice cream, dressings, and eggnog are made with pasteurized eggs and do not increase the risk of salmonella. Restaurants should be using pasteurized eggs in any recipe that is made with raw eggs, such as Hollandaise sauce or dressings.



Soft Cheeses: Imported soft cheeses may contain bacteria called Listeria, which can cause miscarriage. Listeria has the ability to cross the placenta and may infect the baby leading to infection or blood poisoning, which can be life-threatening. You would need to avoid soft cheeses such as: Brie, Camembert, Roquefort, Feta, Gorgonzola and Mexican style cheeses that include queso blanco and queso fresco, unless they clearly state that they are made from pasteurized milk. All soft non-imported cheeses made with pasteurized milk are safe to eat.

Unpasteurized Milk: Unpasteurized milk may contain bacteria called listeria, which can cause miscarriage. Listeria has the ability to cross the placenta and may infect the baby leading to infection or blood poisoning, which can be life-threatening. Make sure that any milk you drink is pasteurized.

Pate: Refrigerated pate or meat spreads should be avoided because they may contain the bacteria listeria. Canned pate, or shelf-safe meat spreads can be eaten.

Caffeine: Although most studies show that caffeine intake in moderation is OK, there are others that show that caffeine intake may be related to miscarriages. Avoid caffeine during the first trimester to reduce the likelihood of a miscarriage. As a general rule, caffeine should be limited to fewer than 300 mg per day during pregnancy. Caffeine is a diuretic, which means it helps eliminate fluids from the body. This can result in water and calcium loss. It is important that you are drinking plenty of water, juice, and milk rather than caffeinated beverages. Some research shows that large amounts of caffeine are associated with miscarriage, premature birth, low birth weight, and withdrawal symptoms in infants.

Alcohol: There is NO amount of alcohol that is known to be safe during pregnancy, and therefore alcohol should be avoided during pregnancy. Prenatal exposure to alcohol can interfere with the healthy development of the baby. Depending on the amount, timing, and pattern of use, alcohol consumption during pregnancy can lead to Fetal Alcohol Syndrome or other developmental disorders. If you consumed alcohol before you knew you were pregnant, stop drinking now. You should continue to avoid alcohol during breastfeeding. Exposure of alcohol to an infant poses harmful risks, and alcohol does reach the baby during breastfeeding.

Unwashed Vegetables: Yes, vegetables are safe to eat, so you still need to eat them. However, it is essential to make sure they are washed to avoid potential exposure to toxoplasmosis. Toxoplasmosis may contaminate the soil where the vegetables were grown.

What is the problem with fish?

Many fish, especially large fish that eat other fish and live a long time, contain mercury, dioxins, and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs). These toxins can cause problems with the development of your baby's brain and nerves and may even cause cancer.

Should I just stop eating fish?

No. Fish is a wonderful source of protein and other nutrients. You should continue to eat fish, but you may need to limit the amount and change the kind of fish you eat. Raw or undercooked fish should be avoided.



So, which fish are safe?

Use the following tables to help you decide what fish to eat and in what quantities.

HIGHEST MERCURY (Avoid if Pregnant)

Shark
Swordfish
King Mackerel
Tilefish
Orange Roughy
Grouper
Marlin

High Mercury (No more than 3 - 6oz Servings/Month)

Bass (saltwater)
Croaker
Halibut
Tuna (Ahi, bluefin, canned albacore)
Sea Trout
Bluefish
Lobster (American/Maine)

Medium Mercury (No more than 6 - 6oz Servings/Month)

Carp
Mahi Mahi
Crab (Dungeness, Blue, Snow)
Snapper
Herring
Monkfish
Perch
Skate
Cod
Tuna (canned chunk light)

Lowest Mercury (Enjoy 2 - 6oz Servings/Week)

Anchovies
Butterfish
Calamari
Caviar
Crab (king)
Pollock
Catfish
Whitefish
Sturgeon (farmed)

Perch (ocean)
Scallops
Flounder
Haddock
Hake
Herring
Lobster (Spiny/Rock)
Shad
Trout (freshwater)

Sole
Crawfish/Crayfish
Salmon
Shrimp
Clams
Tilapia
Oysters
Sardines

Nutrition: Foods High in Iron

Eating a balanced diet that includes food from the iron rich food list can help prevent iron deficiency anemia.



Recommended daily intake of iron:

Females ages 11 to 50 - 18 mg

Females over age 50 - 10 mg

Pregnant women - 30 to 60 mg

You can improve the way your body absorbs iron by eating foods from the iron rich food list. Raw foods provide iron that is absorbed most efficiently. Foods that are rich in vitamin C such as citrus and tomato are known to increase iron absorption.

Iron Rich Food List Suggestions

<i>Vegetables and fruit</i>	<i>Servings and iron content</i>
Collard greens, kale, mustard, beet, or turnip greens	1/2 cup contains 2 mg
cooked spinach	1 cup contains 3.5 mg
Cooked peas	1 cup contains 3 mg
Spinach	1 cup contains 4 mg
Dried apricots	1 cup contains 7.2 mg
Dried peaches	1 cup contains 9.6 mg
Dried figs	2 pieces contains 4 mg
Dried dates	4 pieces contains 1.7 mg
Prunes	1 cup contains 3.8 mg
Raisins	1 cup contains 5.1 mg

<i>Meat/Fish</i>	<i>Servings and iron content</i>
Chicken/beef liver	100 grams contains 8.8 mg
Cooked beef	100 grams contains 5.5 mg
Cooked turkey meat	100 grams contains 4.8 mg
Sardines	100 grams contains 4 mg
Tuna fish in oil	½ can contains 1.2 mg
<i>Beans</i>	<i>Servings and iron content</i>
Kidney, lima, navy, black, pinto, soy beans, and lentils	1 cup contains 5.0 mg
<i>Iron Fortified Whole Grains</i>	<i>Servings and iron content</i>
Cereals, breads, enriched rice, and pasta	1 cup contains 1-16 mg
Brown bread	2 slices contains 1.7 mg
Oatmeal, uncooked	2 Tbsp contains 4.5 mg
<i>Other</i>	<i>Servings and iron content</i>
Egg	1 egg contains 0.7 mg
Almonds	15 nuts contains 4.4 mg
Tahini	2 Tbsp contains 5 mg
Hummus	3 Tbsp contains 2.6 mg

Nutrition: Foods High in Calcium

When you're pregnant, your developing baby needs calcium to build strong bones and teeth, to grow a healthy heart, nerves, and muscles; and to develop a normal heart rhythm and blood-clotting abilities. If you don't get enough calcium in your diet when you're pregnant, your baby will draw it from your bones, which may impair your own health later on. Most American women don't get nearly enough of this important mineral. Aim for four servings of dairy products or other calcium-rich foods a day.



Even after your baby's born and you're finished nursing, keep paying attention to your calcium intake. You'll need the mineral to help strengthen bones and ward off bone loss (osteoporosis) later in life.

Recommended daily intake of calcium:

Females over age 13 - 1300 mg

Pregnant women – 1500 to 2000 mg

<i>Food</i>	<i>Milligrams (mg) per serving</i>	<i>Percent DV*</i>
Yogurt, plain, low fat, 8 ounces	415	42
Sardines, canned in oil, with bones, 3 ounces	324	32
Cheddar cheese, 1.5 ounces	306	31
Milk, 8 ounces	302	30
Mozzarella, part skim, 1.5 ounces	275	28
Yogurt, fruit, low fat, 8 ounces	245–384	25–38
Orange juice, calcium-fortified, 6 ounces	200–260	20–26
Tofu, firm, made with calcium sulfate, ½ cup	204	20
Salmon, pink, canned, solids with bone, 3 ounces	181	18
Pudding, chocolate, instant, made with 2% milk, ½ cup	153	15
Cottage cheese, 1% milk fat, 1 cup unpacked	138	14
Tofu, soft, made with calcium sulfate, ½ cup	138	14
Spinach, cooked, ½ cup	120	12
Ready-to-eat cereal, calcium-fortified, 1 cup	100–1,000	10–100
Instant breakfast drink, powder prepared with water, 8 ounces	105–250	10–25
Frozen yogurt, vanilla, soft serve, ½ cup	103	10
Greens (turnip, kale), boiled, ½ cup	99	10
Ice cream, vanilla, ½ cup	85	8.5
Soy beverage, calcium-fortified, 8 ounces	80–500	8–50
Chinese cabbage, raw, 1 cup	74	7

Pregnancy and Weight Gain

Gaining the right amount of weight during pregnancy by eating a healthy, balanced diet is a good sign that your baby is getting all the nutrients he or she needs and is growing at a healthy rate.

It is not necessary to "eat for two" during pregnancy. It's true that you need extra calories from nutrient-rich foods to help your baby grow, but you generally need to consume only 100 to 300 more calories than you did before you became pregnant to meet the needs of your growing baby.

Pre-pregnancy weight	Recommended weight gain
Underweight (BMI less than 18.5)	28 to 40 pounds (about 13 to 18 kilograms)
Normal weight (BMI 18.5 to 24.9)	25 to 35 pounds (about 11 to 16 kilograms)
Overweight (BMI 25 to 29.9)	15 to 25 pounds (about 7 to 11 kilograms)
Obese (BMI 30 or greater)	11 to 20 pounds (about 5 to 9 kilograms)



Ask your health care provider how much weight you should gain during pregnancy. A woman of average weight before pregnancy should gain 25 to 35 pounds during pregnancy. Underweight women should gain 28-40 pounds during pregnancy. Overweight women may need to gain only 15-25 pounds during pregnancy. You may need to gain more or less weight, depending on what your health care provider recommends.

In general, you should gain about 2 to 4 pounds during your first three months of pregnancy and 1 pound a week for the remainder of your pregnancy. If you are expecting twins you should gain 35 to 45 pounds during your pregnancy. This would be an average of 1 ½ pounds per week after the usual weight gain in the first three months.

Where Does the Extra Weight Go During Pregnancy?

Baby	8 pounds
Placenta	2-3 pounds
Amniotic fluid	2-3 pounds
Breast tissue	2-3 pounds
Blood supply	4 pounds
Fat stores for delivery and breastfeeding	5-9 pounds
Uterus increase	2-5 pounds
Total	25 to 35 pounds

Is It Safe to Lose Weight When Pregnant?

In some cases when a woman is very overweight, it is safe to lose weight during pregnancy under the supervision of a medical provider. However, in most cases women should not try to lose weight during pregnancy.

How Can I Gain the Right Amount of Weight During Pregnancy?

If your health care provider recommends gaining more weight during pregnancy, here are some suggestions:

- ❑ Eat five to six small, frequent meals every day.
- ❑ Keep quick, easy snacks on hand, such as nuts, raisins, cheese and crackers, dried fruit, and ice cream/yogurt.
- ❑ Spread peanut butter on toast, crackers, apples, bananas, or celery. One tablespoon of creamy peanut butter will provide about 100 calories and seven grams of protein.
- ❑ Add nonfat powdered milk to foods such as mashed potatoes, scrambled eggs and hot cereal.
- ❑ Add condiments to your meal, such as butter or margarine, cream cheese, gravy, sour cream, and cheese.

What Should I Do If I Gain Too Much Weight During Pregnancy?

If you have gained more weight than recommended during the beginning of your pregnancy, talk to your medical provider. In most cases it is not appropriate to intentionally attempt to lose weight during pregnancy.

Be sure to eat a variety of foods to get all the nutrients you and your baby need. Here are some tips to slow your weight gain:

- ❑ When eating out at a fast food restaurant, choose lower fat items such as broiled chicken breast sandwich with tomato and lettuce (no sauce or mayonnaise), side salad with low-fat dressing, plain bagels or a plain baked potato. Avoid fried foods such as French fries, mozzarella sticks, or breaded chicken patties.
- ❑ Avoid whole milk products. You need at least four servings of milk products every day. However, using skim, 1%, or 2% milk will greatly reduce the amount of calories and fat you eat. Also choose low-fat or fat-free cheese or yogurt.
- ❑ Limit sweet or sugary drinks. Sweetened drinks such as soft drinks, fruit punch, fruit drinks, iced tea, lemonade, or powdered drink mixes provide many calories with little nutrients. Choose water, club soda, or mineral water to avoid extra calories.
- ❑ Do not add salt to foods when cooking. Salt causes your body to retain water.
- ❑ Limit sweets and high calorie snacks. Cookies, candies, donuts, cakes, syrup, honey, and potato chips provide many calories with little nutrition. Try not to eat these types of foods every day. Instead, try fresh fruit, low-fat yogurt, angel food cake with strawberries, or pretzels as lower calorie snack and dessert choices.
- ❑ Use fats in moderation. Fats include cooking oils, margarine, butter, gravy, sauces, mayonnaise, regular salad dressings, sauces, lard, sour cream, and cream cheese. Try the lower fat substitutes that are available for these foods.
- ❑ Prepare meals using low-fat cooking methods. Frying foods in oil or butter will increase the calories and fat of that meal. Baking, broiling, grilling, or boiling are healthier, lower fat methods of cooking.



Exercise: Moderate exercise, as recommended by your health care provider, can help burn excess calories. Walking or swimming is generally safe, effective exercises for pregnant women. But, be sure to talk to your health care provider before starting an exercise program.