Top Tips for Eating Right During Pregnancy

Reviewed by Taylor Wolfram, MS, RDN, LDN
Published December 05, 2016

March is National Nutrition Month, when the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics reminds everyone to return to the basics of healthy eating. It is also the time of year when the Academy celebrates expertise of registered dietitian nutritionists as the food and nutrition experts.

The 40 (or so) weeks of pregnancy are a magical time. Keeping a healthy lifestyle throughout pregnancy, as well as before and after, is key for both baby and mother. Important steps to a healthy pregnancy include eating a balanced diet; gaining the right amount of weight; enjoying regular physical activity; taking a vitamin and mineral supplement if recommended by a physician; and avoiding alcohol, tobacco and other harmful substances.

Foods Fit for Mom and Baby

Moms-to-be need a variety of foods from all the MyPlate food groups. A balanced diet with a variety of foods can provide healthy women with enough nutrients for pregnancy. Safe food practices are important, too, since pregnant women are at higher risk of food poisoning.

Pregnant women need a balanced diet including:

- **Whole grains:** Breads, cereals, pastas and brown rice.
- **Fruits:** All types of fruits, fresh, frozen or canned without added sugars.
- **Vegetables:** Eat a variety of colorful vegetables, fresh, frozen or canned with no added salt. Raw sprouts should be avoided.
- **Lean protein:** Choose lean protein from meat, poultry, fish, eggs, beans and peas, peanut butter, soy products and nuts. Pregnant women should avoid eating tilefish, shark, swordfish and king mackerel, and limit white (albacore) tuna to 6 ounces per week. Deli, luncheon meats and hot dogs should be reheated if consumed.
- **Low-fat or fat-free dairy:** This includes milk, cheese and yogurt. Unpasteurized milk and some soft cheeses that are made from unpasteurized milk also should be avoided.
• **Healthful fats:** From foods such as avocados, nuts and seeds as well as vegetable oils including canola and olive oil.

Avoid extra calories from added sugars and solid fats, which can lead to **unhealthy weight gain**. Cut down on foods such as regular soda, sweets and fried snacks.

**Key Nutrients for Healthy Pregnancy**

- **Folic Acid:** Folic acid reduces the risk of birth defects that affect the spinal cord. All women of childbearing age and pregnant women should consume at least 400 micrograms of folic acid each day. Natural food sources of folate include legumes, green leafy vegetables and citrus fruits. Folate also can be obtained through fortified foods such as cereals, pastas and bread as well as supplements.

- **Iron:** Maternal iron deficiency is the most common nutritional deficiency during pregnancy. Pregnant women need at least 27 milligrams of iron each day. Foods with high and moderate amounts of iron include red meat, chicken and fish, fortified cereals, spinach, some leafy greens and beans. For vegetarians and women who do not eat a lot of meat, increase iron absorption by combining plant-based sources of iron with vitamin C-rich foods. For example, try spinach salad with mandarin oranges or cereal with strawberries.

- **Calcium:** During pregnancy, calcium is needed for the healthy development of a baby’s teeth, bones, heart, nerves and muscles. When a pregnant woman does not consume enough calcium, it is taken from her bones for the baby. It is important to consume adequate amounts of calcium daily before, during and after pregnancy. The recommended amount of calcium during pregnancy is 1,300 milligrams per day for adolescents 14 to 18 years old and 1,000 milligrams per day for women aged 19 to 50. That means at least three daily servings of calcium-rich foods such as low-fat or fat-free milk, yogurt or cheese or calcium-fortified plant-based beverages, cereals and juices.

Your doctor or registered dietitian nutritionist may recommend a prenatal vitamin/mineral supplement to help ensure that you get enough iron, folic acid and other nutrients.

*Reviewed November 2016*

© 2017 eatright.org, Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, All Rights Reserved.