eating while you are pregnant

choosing food to keep you and your baby healthy
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During pregnancy you need to make sure that your diet is providing enough energy and nutrients for your baby to grow and develop, and for your body to cope with the changes taking place. This booklet contains practical advice to help you make some healthy food choices while you’re pregnant.

Q What should I be eating?
A It’s important to try to eat a variety of foods including:

- plenty of fruit and vegetables (fresh, frozen, tinned, dried or a glass of juice) – aim for at least five portions a day

- plenty of starchy foods, such as bread, pasta, rice and potatoes

- protein, such as lean meat and chicken, fish (aim for at least two servings of fish a week, including one of oily fish), eggs and pulses (such as beans and lentils). These are also good sources of iron (see page 2)

- plenty of fibre, found in wholegrain bread, pasta, rice, pulses, and fruit and vegetables – this helps prevent constipation

- dairy foods such as milk, cheese and yoghurt, which contain calcium
Do I need extra iron?

Pregnant women can become deficient in iron, so make sure you choose plenty of iron-rich foods. Try to have some food or drink containing vitamin C, such as a glass of fruit juice, at the same time as an iron-rich meal because this will help your body absorb the iron.

If the iron level in your blood becomes low, your GP or midwife will advise you to take iron supplements.

Good sources of iron

- red meat
- pulses
- bread
- green vegetables
- fortified breakfast cereals

Although liver also contains lots of iron, you should avoid eating it while you’re pregnant. (See Is there any food I should avoid? on page 4.)
Do I need to take any vitamin supplements?

You should take a 400 microgram (mcg) folic acid supplement each day until the 12th week of your pregnancy. Ideally, you should have started to take these supplements before you became pregnant.

You should also include foods containing folic acid in your diet, such as green vegetables and brown rice, fortified bread and breakfast cereals.

Folic acid has been shown to reduce the risk of neural tube defects such as spina bifida. If you want to get your folic acid from a multivitamin tablet, make sure it contains the right amount. Remember that if you take more than one multivitamin tablet, you could overdose on the other vitamins they contain. (See Is there any food I should avoid? on page 4.)

If you have already had a pregnancy affected by a neural tube defect, consult your GP for advice.

You also need to take supplements containing 10 mcg of vitamin D each day. The best source of vitamin D is summer sunlight (but remember to take care not to burn!).

If you are of Asian origin or if you always cover up all your skin when you're outside, you may be particularly short of vitamin D. Ask your GP for more information.

If you receive Income Support or Jobseekers Allowance you're entitled to free vitamin D supplements from maternity and child health clinics.
Is there any food I should avoid?

There are certain foods you shouldn’t eat while you’re pregnant because they can contain high levels of listeria, a germ that can cause miscarriage, stillbirth or severe illness in a newborn baby. Remember to avoid the following:

• soft mould-ripened cheese, such as Camembert, Brie and blue-veined cheese. There is no risk with hard cheeses (such as Cheddar), cottage cheese and processed cheese

• pâté (any type, including vegetable)

• uncooked or undercooked ready-prepared meals. Make sure you heat ready-prepared meals until they’re piping hot all the way through

You should also remember to:

• Avoid eating raw eggs and food containing raw or partially cooked eggs. Only eat eggs that have been cooked until both the white and yolk are solid. This is to avoid the risk of salmonella, which causes a type of food poisoning.

• Always wash your hands after handling raw meat, and keep raw foods separate from ready-to-eat foods. This is to avoid food poisoning germs, such as salmonella, campylobacter and E. coli O157.

• Make sure you only eat meat that has been well cooked. Take particular care with sausages and minced meat.

• Always wear gloves when you’re gardening or changing cat litter, and wash your hands afterwards. This is to avoid toxoplasmosis, an infection caused by a parasite found in meat, cat faeces and soil. Toxoplasmosis can be harmful to unborn babies.
- Make sure you don’t have too much vitamin A. This means you should avoid taking high-dose multivitamin supplements and avoid eating liver and liver products such as pâté. You need some vitamin A, but if you have too much, levels could build up and be too high during pregnancy. Ask your GP or midwife if you would like more information.

- Avoid eating shark, swordfish and marlin and limit the amount of tuna you eat. Don’t eat more than one tuna steak a week (weighing about 140g cooked or 170g raw) or two medium-size cans of tuna a week (with a drained weight of about 140g per can). For canned tuna, this means about six rounds of tuna sandwiches or three tuna salads. This is because of the levels of mercury in these fish. At high levels, mercury can harm a baby’s developing nervous system.

**It’s also a good idea to:**

- Cut down on foods such as cakes and biscuits, because these are high in fat and sugar. This can also help you to avoid putting on too much weight during pregnancy.

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**Some healthier light meals and snacks**

- sandwiches or pitta bread filled with chicken, cottage cheese or lean ham
- low-fat yoghurts
- vegetable and bean soups
- fruit – fresh, canned in juice or dried fruit such as raisins