Pregnancy & healthy eating

A healthy diet is important to everyone but especially so for pregnant women. It will provide you with the energy and nutrients you need to cope with pregnancy as well as providing a great start for your baby.
What does ‘healthy eating’ mean?

For most of us, it does not mean a huge change in our diets - just a shift in the balance of foods we eat.

Include regular amounts of the following:

- Plenty of fruit and vegetables, aim to eat five portions a day.
- Good portions of starchy foods such as potatoes, pasta, rice and other cereals.
- Calcium-containing foods such as dairy products, green vegetables, sardines and tofu. Calcium is better absorbed with Vitamin D which is found in oily fish, eggs, milk products, some margarines and breakfast cereals. The main source of Vitamin D for vegans is sunlight, so if exposure to sunlight is limited, include a fortified food source or a Vitamin D supplement.
**Feeling mean?**

- Foods rich in iron, including lean red meats and fortified breakfast cereals. For vegetarians, foods with iron include eggs, pulses, nuts, wholemeal bread and green vegetables. To ensure the iron from vegetable sources is absorbed these should be eaten with foods containing a source of Vitamin C, such as citrus fruit, e.g. oranges and fruit juices.

- Plenty of fluid. Avoid too much tea or coffee and try to drink as much water as possible, try and drink around 8-12 glasses of fluid a day. This will help prevent constipation.

- Avoid drinking alcohol. If you do choose to drink, to minimise the risk to the baby, you should not drink more than one or two units of alcohol once or twice a week and should not get drunk.
When should I start making changes to my diet?

As soon as possible – don’t worry if you are already a few months pregnant, it is never too late to start.

One vitamin that is important in early pregnancy is folic acid as this helps to develop the baby’s spine and brain. Folic acid occurs naturally in green vegetables, such as brussel sprouts, broccoli, green beans and is also added to breakfast cereals.

It is recommended that you take a 400 microgram folic acid supplement every day until the end of the twelfth week of pregnancy. Ask your GP, Health Visitor or Midwife for more information about the importance of folic acid.
Are there any foods I should avoid?

During pregnancy there are certain foods which should be avoided because they may pose a risk to the baby.

- Liver and liver products. Liver contains very high levels of Vitamin A, which can be toxic to an unborn baby. Also avoid Vitamin A supplements.

- Soft, unpasteurised and blue-veined cheeses such as Stilton, Brie and Camembert. Goat's cheese should also be avoided. All these cheeses may contain listeria, which is a bacteria that can be harmful to unborn babies. Cottage cheese and cheese spread is fine, as is hard cheese such as Cheddar and Edam.

- Undercooked meats and eggs. To protect against bacterial infections always make sure that these foods are well cooked. Also be careful with pre-cooked foods and ready-prepared foods if not reheated thoroughly.

- Shark, swordfish and marlin. Limit the amount of tuna eaten; don't eat more than one tuna steak or two medium-sized cans of tuna a week which is about six rounds of tuna sandwiches or three tuna salads. This is due to the levels of mercury in these fish. At high levels, mercury can harm a baby's developing nervous system.
Do vegetarians need supplements?

There is no reason why a vegetarian diet should not be a healthy one. Ensure you eat a variety of starchy foods, beans, lentils, peas, fruit and vegetables, supplements should then not be necessary.

If you feel your diet is restricted in some way then talk to your Midwife, Health Visitor or G.P.

What about constipation?

A healthy diet containing plenty of fruit and vegetables, starchy foods, lots of fluid and taking regular physical activity usually helps with constipation.

Add fibre to your diet by eating more fruit and vegetables, wholegrain cereals and pulses such as beans and lentils.
What about weight gain?

Weight gain is inevitable during pregnancy and is quite normal!

Weight gain is usually noticed in the final three months of pregnancy. An average gain is around 10–12 kg (22-26 lbs), although this will depend on pre-pregnancy weight. By following healthy eating guidelines, eating to appetite, avoiding high calorie foods and taking regular, gentle exercise you are unlikely to gain excessive weight.

Dieting during pregnancy is NOT recommended as it can deprive your baby of important nutrients. If you are worried about weight – talk to your Midwife, Health Visitor or G.P.

I have ‘morning sickness’

Nausea and sickness can occur at any time of the day and you may feel you are missing out on important foods during these times. The answer is to eat plenty of nutritious foods when you do feel hungry and not to worry about it when you can’t face food.

Small, regular, simple meals or small frequent snacks including breads, rice, potatoes and pasta often help as does avoiding fatty or highly processed foods. Remember to drink plenty even if you are unable to manage food.