

Prenatal Vitamins

Eating a healthy diet is always a wise idea – especially during pregnancy. It is also recommended during pregnancy to also take a prenatal vitamin to help cover any nutritional gaps in the mother's diet. Prenatal vitamins contain many vitamins and minerals. Folic acid, iron, and calcium are especially important.

Folic Acid, Iron, and Calcium

Folic acid helps prevent neural tube birth defects, which affect the brain and spinal cord. Neural tube defects develop in the first 28 days after conception, before many women know they are pregnant. Because about half of all pregnancies are unplanned, it's recommended that any woman who could get pregnant take 800 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid daily, starting before conception and continuing for the first 12 weeks of pregnancy.

A woman who has already had a baby with a neural tube defect should talk to her health care provider about whether she might need to take a different dose of folic acid. Studies have shown that taking a larger dose (up to 4,000 micrograms) at least one month before and during the first trimester may be beneficial for those women but check with your doctor first.

Foods containing folic acid include green leafy vegetables, nuts, beans, citrus fruits, and many fortified foods. Even so, it's a good idea to take a supplement with the right amount of folic acid, as a backup. Calcium is also important for a pregnant woman. It can help prevent her from losing her own bone density, as the baby uses calcium for its own bone growth. Iron helps create red blood in both the mother and baby which carries oxygen. The baby needs large amounts of iron to build its organs. Without extra iron, many women become anemic during pregnancy.

Look for a prenatal vitamin that includes:

- 800 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid
- 400 IU of vitamin D
- 200 to 300 milligrams (mg) of calcium
- 70 mg of vitamin C
- 3 mg of thiamine
- 2 mg of riboflavin
- 20 mg of niacin
- 6 mcg of vitamin B12
- 10 mg of vitamin E
- 15 mg of zinc
- 17 mg of iron

If Your Prenatal Vitamin Makes You Nauseous: Some prenatal vitamins can increase nausea. If that happens to you, talk to your health care provider. He or she may be able to prescribe a different kind of prenatal vitamin – for example, some women may do better with chewable rather than those you swallow whole. In some cases, your doctor will give you a prescription for a certain type of prenatal vitamin. You can try breaking the tablet in half and taking it at two different times during the day.

Nutrition During and After Pregnancy

It is important to have a healthy diet during pregnancy and while breastfeeding. Your diet should be varied and contain adequate fiber and eight cups of fluid every day. Small, frequent meals help prevent your blood sugar from dropping. A healthy diet includes proteins, carbohydrates, fats, vitamins, minerals, and plenty of water. The U.S. government publishes dietary guidelines that can help you determine how many servings of each kind of food to eat every day. Eating a variety of foods in the proportions indicated is a good step toward staying healthy. Here are some of the most common nutrients you need and the foods that contain them.

Nutrient	Needed for	Best sources
Protein	cell growth and blood production	lean meat, fish, poultry, egg whites, beans, peanut butter, tofu
Carbohydrates	daily energy production	breads, cereals, rice, potatoes, pasta, fruits, vegetables
Calcium	strong bones and teeth, muscle contraction, nerve function	milk, cheese, yogurt, sardines or salmon with bones, spinach
Iron	red blood cell production (to prevent anemia)	lean red meat, spinach, iron-fortified whole-grain breads and cereals
Vitamin A	healthy skin, good eyesight, growing bones	carrots, dark leafy greens, sweet potatoes
Vitamin C	healthy gums, teeth, and bones; assistance with iron absorption	citrus fruit, broccoli, tomatoes, fortified fruit juices
Vitamin B6	red blood cell formation; effective use of protein, fat, and carbohydrates	pork, ham, whole-grain cereals, bananas
Vitamin B12	formation of red blood cells, maintaining nervous system health	meat, fish, poultry, milk (Note: vegetarians who don't eat dairy products need supplemental B12)
Vitamin D	healthy bones and teeth; aids absorption of calcium	fortified milk, dairy products, cereals, breads
Folic acid	blood and protein production, effective enzyme function	green leafy vegetables, dark yellow fruits and vegetables, beans, peas, nuts
Fat	body energy stores	meat, whole-milk dairy products, nuts, peanut butter, margarine, vegetable oils (Note: limit fat intake to 30% or less of your total daily calorie intake)