

Healthy eating

thinking
of having a

baby

what to eat to
give your baby
the best start



FOOD
STANDARDS
AGENCY

If you're trying for a baby, this booklet contains practical food advice to help you make healthy choices and give your baby the best start in life.

Q What should I be eating?

A A healthy balanced diet is an important part of a healthy lifestyle at any time, but particularly when you're planning a pregnancy.

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 of a variety of different types
- plenty of starchy foods, such as bread, pasta, rice and potatoes – choose wholegrain options when you can
- sources of protein, such as lean meat and chicken, fish, eggs and pulses (such as beans and lentils). These are also good sources of iron (see page 2). Try to eat fish at least twice a week including some oily fish, such as salmon, mackerel, sardines and trout. But don't have more than two portions of oily fish a week
- dairy foods, such as milk, cheese and yoghurt, which contain calcium – try to choose reduced/fat options when you can



Q Do I need extra iron?

Pregnant women can become deficient in iron, so when you're trying to get pregnant it's a good idea to choose plenty of iron-rich foods to build up your iron stores. 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 may help your body to absorb the iron.



Good sources of iron

- red meat (choose lean cuts)
- pulses
- bread
- green vegetables
- wholegrain starchy foods and fortified breakfast cereals
- dried fruit

Although liver also contains lots of iron, you should avoid eating it while you're pregnant or trying to become pregnant. (See **Is there any food I should avoid?** below.)

Q Is there any food I should avoid?

- A** Make sure you don't have too much vitamin A. This means you should avoid eating liver and liver products such as pâté, and you should avoid taking supplements containing vitamin A or fish liver oil. You need some vitamin A, but if you have too much during pregnancy, this could harm your baby. Ask your GP



or midwife if you would like more information.

You should also avoid eating shark, swordfish and marlin and limit the amount of tuna you eat. Don't eat more than two tuna steaks a week (weighing about 140g cooked or 170g raw) or four medium-size cans of tuna a week (with a drained weight of about 140g per can). This is because of the levels of mercury in these fish. At high levels, mercury can harm a baby's developing nervous system. And remember not to have more than two portions of oily fish a week.

Your baby could be at a higher risk of developing a peanut allergy if you, the baby's father, brothers or sisters have a history of allergic conditions such as food allergy, hayfever, asthma and/or eczema. If you think your baby would be in this higher-risk group, you may wish to avoid eating peanuts and peanut products when you're trying to get pregnant and when you have become pregnant.

It's a good idea to cut down on foods such as cakes and biscuits because these are high in fat and sugar. This can

Some healthier light meals and snacks

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

help you keep your weight under control.



Q Do I need any vitamin supplements?

- A When you're trying to get pregnant you should take a 400 microgram (mcg) folic acid supplement each day. Aim to take these supplements from the time you stop using contraception until the 12th week of pregnancy.

You should also try to eat foods containing folate – the natural form of folic acid – such as green vegetables and brown rice, as well as fortified bread and breakfast cereals.

Folic acid has been shown to reduce the risk of neural tube defects such as spina bifida. If you would like to take your folic acid in a supplement that contains other vitamins, make sure it contains 400 mcg folic acid and doesn't contain vitamin A or fish liver oil.

Some women are at a higher risk of having a baby affected by a neural tube defect, for example women who have already had a pregnancy affected by a neural tube defect and women who have diabetes. These women may need to take more folic acid – ask your GP for advice.

Q Do I need to cut out alcohol?

- A When you're trying to get pregnant it's best to stop drinking altogether. If you do choose to drink, have no more than 1-2 units of alcohol, once or twice a week and avoid getting drunk. A unit is half a pint of standard strength beer, lager or cider, or a pub measure of spirit. A glass of wine is about 2 units and alcopops are about 1.5 units.

Q Where can I get more information?

- A If you would like more information on planning a pregnancy, speak to your GP or health visitor, or contact your local health promotion unit.

You might also be interested in *Eating while you are pregnant* and *Eating for breastfeeding* from Food Standards Agency Publications.





www.eatwell.gov.uk/tryingforababy

