



## Preconception nutrition

Eating a healthy diet before trying for a baby is just as important as eating healthily while pregnant<sup>1</sup>.

If you're trying to get pregnant, you never know exactly when you may fall pregnant, so it makes sense to adopt a healthy lifestyle beforehand<sup>1</sup>. This will not only boost your chances of conception, but make adapting to a healthy diet during pregnancy easier<sup>1</sup>.

Diet plays a big role in conception, especially if you are overweight<sup>2</sup>. If you have a BMI of more than 29, and you have irregular periods, or no periods at all, losing weight by eating a good diet may increase your chances of conceiving<sup>2</sup>.

And again, if you're underweight, and you have irregular periods, or no periods at all, regaining weight through a healthy diet will get your ovaries working again, improving your chances of conceiving<sup>2</sup>.

Your partner's diet and lifestyle will also affect your chances of conception<sup>2</sup>. So, trying for a baby is an excellent time for you both to evaluate your diet and lifestyle and make any changes<sup>1</sup>.

## Take folic acid

You should take 400 micrograms of folic acid every day for at least one month before conception and through to the 12th week of pregnancy to help protect the baby from spina bifida<sup>3, 4</sup>.

The condition, which means 'split spine', happens when the spinal cord hasn't formed properly<sup>4</sup>. It can cause paralysis, muscle weakness, learning difficulties and urinary problems in children<sup>4</sup>.

Folic acid is important to take while trying to conceive because the spine develops sometime between day 14 and 23 after conception – a time when many women don't realise they're pregnant<sup>4</sup>.

As well as a folic acid supplement, you should also eat natural folate found in baked beans, chick peas, green leafy vegetables, lentils, orange juice, oranges, peas, rice, soya beans, split peas and sprouts<sup>1, 2</sup>. But try not to over-boil if you cook them, as you will lose all the nutrients.

If you have diabetes, epilepsy or coeliac disease you may need to have a higher dose of folic acid<sup>4</sup>.

Talk to your GP if you're taking any medication, as some drugs stop nutrients being absorbed properly<sup>4</sup>.

If you're taking epilepsy or anti-convulsant drugs, you should talk to your neurologist before taking folic acid, as the two can work against each other<sup>4</sup>.

## **Vitamin D**

You may also want to start taking at least 10 micrograms (mcg) of vitamin D each day, which helps absorb calcium and builds strong bones<sup>5</sup>.

Vitamin D occurs naturally in some animal products, including oily fish, eggs, butter and meat and is added to margarine and other foods such as cereal<sup>5</sup>.

But most of our vitamin D comes from the sun's rays, so spending ten to 15 minutes with your face and arms exposed, before 11am and after 3pm in the summer, will top up levels too<sup>5</sup>. (But be careful not to burn!)

## **Balanced diet**

You need to eat plenty of protein, fibre, calcium, iron and other minerals and vitamins<sup>1, 3</sup>.

These can all be found in<sup>1, 3</sup>:

- Fruit and vegetables – you should eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day. They can be fresh, frozen, tinned, dried or a glass of juice.
- Starchy foods such as wholegrain bread, pasta, rice and potatoes.
- Dairy products such as milk, cheese and yoghurt.
- Protein such as lean meat and chicken, eggs and pulses (beans and lentils). These foods will also supply you with iron.

## **Eat fish**

Try to eat two servings of fish a week, making sure that one is oily fish like sardines, mackerel and tuna. They contain fatty acids that are important for the development of the brain, nervous system and retina<sup>5</sup>.

Limit tuna to two steaks a week, or four small tins of tuna also because of the risk of mercury, which can damage your baby's developing nervous system<sup>5</sup>.

Also avoid shark, swordfish, and marlin, which may also have high mercury content<sup>5</sup>.

## **Store up on iron**

Once you're pregnant, you may be more at risk of becoming deficient in iron so it's best to build up your supply<sup>1, 3</sup>. When you eat iron-rich food, drink some juice or eat food containing vitamin C to help your body absorb it<sup>1, 3</sup>.

Good sources of iron are<sup>1, 3</sup>:

- Red meat
- Pulses
- Dried fruit
- Bread
- Green vegetables
- Fortified breakfast cereals.

### **Foods to avoid**

It's worth avoiding some foods that may harm an unborn baby just in case you don't realise you're pregnant<sup>1, 3</sup>.

They include<sup>1, 3</sup>:

- Pate and soft cheeses like brie.
- Smoked or raw meat.
- Raw eggs.
- Vitamin A and any multi-vitamins containing vitamin A, liver and liver products, fish liver oils (such as cod liver oil) and other foods fortified with vitamin A. Consuming high levels of vitamin A in pregnancy has been linked to birth defects.
- Peanuts, if you or your partner have allergies, such as eczema, asthma or hayfever. This may reduce the chances of your baby suffering from a nut allergy.
- Fast food, fizzy drinks, sweets, biscuits and crisps as they have little nutritional value and can make you overweight, reducing your chance of conception<sup>2</sup>.

### **Avoid drinking alcohol**

Until fairly recently, pregnant women were told they could drink a moderate amount of alcohol if they were pregnant or trying for a baby<sup>1, 2, 3</sup>. Although the jury is still out regarding how much alcohol is harmful to unborn babies, the Government has opted for the safest option - advising pregnant women or those trying to conceive to avoid alcohol<sup>1, 2, 3</sup>.

Heavy drinking can cause Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) with symptoms such as facial deformities and learning difficulties<sup>1, 3</sup>.

Because you can never be sure when you'll fall pregnant, it's best not to drink at all or if you do, limit your intake to one or two units, once or twice a week<sup>1, 2, 3</sup>. 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 two units and alcopops are about 1.5 units<sup>1, 2, 3</sup>.

Cutting down on alcohol also applies to your partner because drinking excessive amounts can affect the quality of his sperm.<sup>2</sup> He shouldn't drink more than three or four units a day<sup>2</sup>.

## Quit smoking

Smoking, including passive smoking, is thought to affect your chances of getting pregnant<sup>2</sup>.

There's also a link between smoking and poorer quality of sperm, although it's not certain what the effect has on fertility<sup>2</sup>.

## Cut out caffeine

Research has shown that high levels of caffeine can cause low birth weight, or even lead to miscarriage, so it's best to cut down while trying to get pregnant<sup>1, 2, 3</sup>.

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) advises pregnant women to limit the amount of caffeine they consume to no more than 200 mg a day, the equivalent of around two cups of coffee<sup>1</sup>.

Be careful when buying soft drinks and energy drinks because caffeine is sometimes added<sup>1</sup>.

How much caffeine in drinks<sup>1</sup>?

- A mug of instant or brewed coffee contains up to 100mg
- A can of 'energy drink' contains up to 80mg
- A cup of tea contains 50mg
- A chocolate bar (50g) contains up to 50mg
- A can of cola contains up to 40mg.

## More information:

### Food Standards Agency

[www.food.gov.uk](http://www.food.gov.uk)

### Department of Health – The Pregnancy Book 2007

[www.dh.gov.uk](http://www.dh.gov.uk)

#### Sources:

**1. Food Standards Agency**

<http://www.eatwell.gov.uk/agesandstages/>

**2. Assessment and treatment of fertility problems**

<http://www.nice.org.uk/nicemedia/pdf/CG011publicinfoenglish.pdf>

**3. Department of Health – The Pregnancy Book 2007**

[http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH\\_074920](http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_074920)

**4. ASBAH**

<http://www.asbah.org/Resources/ASBAH/PDF%20Documents/WHAT%20IS%20SPINA%20BIFIDA.pdf>

**5. British Nutrition Foundation**

<http://www.nutrition.org.uk/home.asp?siteId=43&sectionId=394&subSectionId=315&parentSection=299&which=1>

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A wide range of women's health resources are available at [www.healthywomen.org.uk](http://www.healthywomen.org.uk)

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