



Healthy eating *for two*

Most people realise that the phrase 'eating for two' isn't meant to be taken literally. Calories aside, however, many women fail to get adequate nutrition when they're expecting.

by Christine Morgan

One explanation, say scientists at the John Hopkins School of Public Health in Baltimore, is that pregnant women's appetites are affected by their moods and that can lead to a lack of the right amount of nutrients required to keep themselves and their unborn babies healthy.

For instance, the study found that anxious pregnant women tended to eat fewer vitamin C-rich foods, while tired mums-to-be ate foods high in zinc, but lacked folic acid in their diet.

Let's face it, living in the 21st century makes it difficult enough to get the right balance of nutrients even when you're not having a baby, which is why many natural health experts recommend a high-quality multivitamin and mineral supplement that's specially formulated for pregnancy.

The formulation is important, as pregnant women should avoid taking too much vitamin A, which, in high doses, may cause birth defects (beta carotene, which is converted to vitamin A in the body, is considered a safe alternative). It also ensures you're getting the right amount of folic acid, which is so vital during pregnancy that the government recommends supplements for pregnant women.

Folic acid is important because it can reduce your baby's risk of developing neural tube defects - that is, abnormalities of the

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brain and spinal cord, such as spina bifida. Experts think it may also help prevent other birth defects such as congenital heart conditions and cleft palate.

Folic Acid is not, however, the only important B vitamin to stock up on during pregnancy. Take vitamin B6, for instance: along with vitamins B1, B2

and B12, it may support a healthy birth weight, as well as help you cope with pregnancy mood swings. In a couple of trials, vitamin B6 has also been linked with relief from morning sickness - which is great news for an estimated 45% of expectant mums (indeed, vomiting caused by morning sickness may also reduce nutrient intake, as food isn't kept long enough in the digestive tract for essential nutrients to be absorbed).

Other vitamins are vital for mother and baby, including vitamin E. According to a study from the University of Aberdeen, babies born to mothers who had low vitamin E intakes during pregnancy were more than five times more likely to suffer from asthma than children whose mums had topped up their vitamin E levels. The same study found a similar link between asthma and low maternal zinc intake during pregnancy.

Getting a good supply of minerals is also crucial when you're expecting. Calcium and zinc, for example, help make your baby's bones, joints and muscles strong and healthy. The most common mineral deficiency during pregnancy, however, is believed to be a lack of iron, thanks to the heavy demands your unborn baby places on your body, especially during the last trimester (or three months). During pregnancy, your blood volume increases dramatically and, if you have low iron levels, you could experience low energy levels and your baby's birth weight may also be affected. But the problem with iron supplements is that many cause constipation, which is why it's important to take an easily-digested form of iron that doesn't cause digestive problems.

To boost your iron intake even further, you need vitamin C, which helps your body absorb iron. Vitamin C may also help your baby develop strong bones and teeth.

Less well known, but equally important for your baby's development, is a nutrient called choline. According to an animal study published in the *Journal of Neurophysiology*, taking a nutrient called choline - found in egg yolks - during pregnancy could help your children to learn faster and have better memories. Experts aren't sure how it works, but it's thought that choline may have something to do with the building of cell membranes in the brain, during embryo development.

If you want your child to be smart, recent research suggests taking omega-3 fatty acid supplements might be a good idea too. Scientists from the University of Western Australia have discovered taking fish oils during pregnancy could improve your child's co-ordination and language skills.

Fish oils contain essential fatty acids called DHA and EPA, which are believed to be important for the development of a baby's brain and eye cells during pregnancy. Of the two, DHA may be the most significant - in studies, it's been linked with higher IQs in children, as well as reduced post-natal depression in new mothers.

Taking good-quality fish oils in supplement form also avoids the problem of contaminants, such as mercury and PCBs, found in fish - for this reason, the Food Standards Agency advises pregnant women to eat no more than two portions of oily fish a week. If you don't eat fish, you can boost your DHA and EPA intake by adding flax seed oil to your diet. This contains an omega-3 fatty acid called ALA, which is converted in the body into DHA and EPA.

Good nutrition while you are pregnant is not just about your baby's health. Glowing good health while pregnant, during labour and beyond, relies on a good supply of all the essential vitamins and minerals and other nutrients such as Omega 3s.

Calcium, magnesium and B vitamins are particularly important, as is zinc for healthy circulation and blood flow, particularly in the placenta.

Because of your growing baby's demands for calcium and magnesium for the formation of bones, you could become deficient in these important minerals and many pregnant women have poor teeth and leg cramps as a result.

Omega 3 fatty acids, DHA and EPA are vital. During the last months of pregnancy, and throughout breastfeeding, the drain on your stores of these nutrients is enormous. It has been reported that mother's brains shrink during pregnancy because of this!

Several pregnancies close together can result in a significant depletion in DHA and EPA and some researchers have linked this with 'the baby blues'.

Eating for the health of both yourself and your baby, is what we should mean when we say 'eating for two'! ■

Living in the 21st century makes it difficult enough to get the right balance of nutrients even when you're not having a baby, which is why many natural health experts recommend a high-quality multivitamin and mineral supplement that's specially formulated for pregnancy.

Always tell your doctor or midwife if you're taking any nutritional supplements while pregnant.



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