



# The Leading Voice of Nutrition *in Australia*



## Healthy Vegetarian Eating During Pregnancy

Good nutrition during pregnancy is important for both you and your baby.

Eating well, by choosing a wide variety of whole-grains, fruit, vegetables, legumes, nuts and seeds, dairy products and/or eggs will help make sure you both get the energy and nutrients you need for good health. While a vegetarian diet can have all the nutrients needed during pregnancy, there are some nutrients that may require special attention.

### Important Nutrients for Pregnant Vegetarians

#### Folate

An adequate intake of folate is particularly important during the month before conception and the first three months of pregnancy to reduce the risk of neural tube defects. You should take a supplement with 400 micrograms of folic acid at least one month before and three months after conception.

**Food sources:** dark green leafy vegetables, legumes, wholegrains, folate-fortified breads and cereals, yeast extracts (e.g. Vegemite®, Marmite®), fruit and vegetables (e.g. green peas, beans, potatoes, cauliflower, oranges, bananas, strawberries).

#### Iron

Important for oxygen transport around the body. Your iron needs increase significantly during pregnancy as your blood volume increases by about 50%. It can be hard to meet your increased needs from food alone, so supplements are often recommended. Check with your dietitian or doctor before taking a new supplement.

**Food sources:** legumes, foods with added iron (e.g. some breads and cereals), tofu, tempeh, nuts, seeds, green leafy vegetables, eggs, quinoa, amaranth, wholegrains, dried fruit.

#### Tips to increase iron absorption:

- Eat foods high in vitamin C (citrus fruits and juices, strawberries, kiwifruit, tomatoes, broccoli) with meals
- Avoid drinking tea and coffee with meals – tannins in tea and coffee worsen iron absorption
- Avoid taking calcium supplement with meals

## Vitamin B12

Vitamin B12 is important during pregnancy for nerve function and neurological development of the foetus.

**Food sources:** dairy foods, eggs, milk alternatives with added vitamin B12, meat alternatives with added vitamin B12. A vitamin B12 supplement may be needed if these foods aren't eaten regularly, particularly if following a vegan diet. Check with your dietitian or doctor before starting a new supplement.

## Vitamin D

Vitamin D helps with calcium absorption into bones and is important for the immune system. A supplement may be required if dietary intake and sun exposure is inadequate. Check with your dietitian or doctor before starting a new supplement.

**Food sources:** eggs, milk wadded vitamin D, margarine with added vitamin D. Vitamin D is also produced by exposing bare skin to the sun.

## Calcium

Calcium is important for strong bones and teeth, proper nerve and muscle function and blood clotting, for both the mother and foetus.

**Food sources:** dairy foods, milk alternatives with added calcium, almonds, brazil nuts, sesame seeds, unhulled tahini (sesame seed paste), amaranth, dried apricots, figs, soybeans, calcium-set tofu, Asian greens, kale, broccoli.

### Tips to increase absorption of calcium:

- Get enough vitamin D
- Limit salt – salt increases calcium loss
- Limit caffeine – caffeine (found in tea, coffee, cola and energy drinks) interferes with calcium absorption
- Phytic acid (in bran and raw vegetables) makes it harder for the body to absorb calcium so have some vegetables cooked and choose wholegrain breads and cereals instead of adding bran

## Zinc

Found in every part of the body and has a wide range of functions. Important for wound healing, healthy skin and a strong immune system. Zinc needs increase during pregnancy to help with new cell growth.

**Food sources:** legumes, grains, nuts, seeds, eggs, milk and cheese, soy products (e.g. tofu, tempeh, soy milk, soy yoghurt).

### Tips to increase zinc absorption:

- Soak legumes before cooking or use canned legumes
- Eat sprouted beans, grains and seeds and breads that contain yeast
- Eat foods containing organic acids such as citric acid (in fruit and vegetables) at meals

## Omega-3

Essential for the development of foetal brain and eye tissue.

**Food sources:** flaxseed oil, chia seed oil, hemp seeds, walnuts, canola oil, soybeans, seaweed, eggs (omega-rich eggs are also available), chia seeds, linseeds, soy milks with added omega-3.

### Tips to achieve optimal ratio of essential fatty acids:

- Eat foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids
- Reduce omega-6 fatty acid consumption by replacing sunflower, safflower and corn oils with canola, soybean or olive oil

## Iodine

All women who are pregnant, breastfeeding or considering pregnancy, should take a supplement with 150 micrograms of iodine daily.

**Food sources:** dairy products, eggs, iodised salt, nori, most store-bought breads.

## Food Safety and Pregnancy

**Listeriosis** is caused by eating food contaminated with the listeria bacteria. Listeria infection is rare, however, if you are infected during pregnancy, it can lead to miscarriage, still-birth, premature birth or serious illness in a newborn baby.

To reduce your risk of infection, you should:

- Eat only freshly prepared foods
- Avoid any food where you are unsure about its hygienic preparation and/or storage
- Avoid high risk foods such as: soft cheeses (brie, camembert and uncooked ricotta) and prepared or stored salads (e.g. salad bars or pre-packaged salads)

**Toxoplasmosis** is a parasite that can result in still birth and physical and neurological defects. To reduce your risk of infection, you should:

- Eat only well-cooked foods
- Avoid cat litter trays

## Common Dietary Problems During Pregnancy

**Nausea** is most common during the first three months of pregnancy. Although it is usually referred to as 'morning sickness', many women can feel sick at any time of the day.

The following suggestions may be helpful:

- Dry toast or cracker biscuits before getting up
- Eat smaller meals
- Eat snacks between meals
- Nibble fresh ginger or add it to tea
- Drink plenty of fluid. Try dry ginger ale, lemonade or mineral water, iced water
- Avoid fatty and highly spiced food

**Constipation:** This can be worsened if you are taking iron supplements. Eating more fibre, regular exercise, and drinking plenty of fluids usually helps.

Foods that are good sources of fibre include:

- Wholegrain breads and cereals
- High fibre breakfast cereals
- Legumes, nuts and seeds
- Fruit and vegetables
- A fibre supplement e.g. psyllium powder.

**Heartburn:** Indigestion is often a problem in the second half of pregnancy as the baby grows and puts pressure on the stomach.

The following ideas may be helpful:

- Eat small frequent meals
- Drink between meals rather than with meals
- Avoid spicy or fatty foods
- After eating, wait for 1 to 2 hours before lying down
- Eat slowly and always sit down to eat, avoid eating on the run
- Don't eat when you are stressed or upset
- Avoid coffee - including decaffeinated coffee. Tea may be a better choice for people with heartburn.