

# Thinking About Having a Baby? Healthy Babies Begin With Healthy Moms

Congratulations – you’re thinking about having a baby! The foods you eat **before** you become pregnant are important to help you and your baby be as healthy as possible. Healthy eating **now** gives the vitamins and minerals that your baby will need in the early weeks of development.

Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating helps you choose the foods that will give you the nutrition you need in preparation for pregnancy. Every day, eat a variety of foods from each of the four food groups:

<i>Grain Products:</i>	5-12 servings of whole grain and enriched products
<i>Vegetables and Fruit:</i>	5-10 servings of a variety of vegetables and fruit
<i>Milk Products:</i>	3-4 servings of lower fat milk products
<i>Meat and Alternatives:</i>	2-3 servings of lean meats, poultry, fish, dried peas, beans and lentils

For a free copy of Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating, call your local public health department or visit the Health Canada website at: [www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/nutrition/pube/foodguid/foodguide.html](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/nutrition/pube/foodguid/foodguide.html)

## Important Nutrients for You and Your Baby

### Folic Acid

Folic acid, also called folate or folacin, is a vitamin needed **before** you conceive and during pregnancy. This vitamin helps reduce the baby's risk of developing a type of birth defect, called neural tube defect, that often affects the brain and spinal cord. If neural tube defects occur, they happen in the first month of pregnancy, likely before you even know you are pregnant! This is why it is so important to make sure you're getting enough folic acid every day **before** you get pregnant.

Many foods contain folic acid, but in small amounts. Asparagus, cooked spinach, romaine lettuce, kidney beans, chickpeas, lentils, orange juice and sunflower seeds are some excellent sources of folic acid.

*Since it is difficult to get enough folic acid from food alone, you need to take a daily multivitamin and mineral supplement that contains 0.4 milligrams (or 400 micrograms) of folic acid before you become pregnant and in the early weeks of pregnancy. Make sure the supplement contains **no more** than 1 milligram (or 1000 micrograms) of folic acid unless your physician recommends otherwise.*

*Talk to your health care professional about taking a multivitamin supplement before you become pregnant.*

### Iron

During pregnancy, your requirement for iron will almost double! This extra iron will be used to make red blood cells that carry oxygen through your own body and to your growing baby. Feeling tired may be the first sign that you are low in iron. Start to build up your iron stores now by eating more whole grain and iron-enriched breakfast cereals, lean meats, dried peas and beans, dark green vegetables, dried fruits and nuts.

To help your body better absorb the iron from plant-based foods, eat them with foods that are high in vitamin C such as berries, tomatoes, peppers, orange juice, broccoli, cantaloupe, cauliflower, kale and potatoes. At the same time, avoid tea and coffee (immediately before, during and after meals) as they decrease the amount of iron that your body absorbs from plant-based foods.

### Calcium

Calcium helps keep your bones and teeth strong. Get used to eating lots of calcium-rich foods now. Milk and fortified soy beverages are excellent sources of calcium and they also contain vitamin D, which helps your body absorb calcium. If you have a milk allergy, talk to your health care provider about calcium supplements.

*Other calcium-containing foods to include in your diet are: yogurt, cheese, orange juice with calcium, tofu set with calcium sulphate, almonds, canned sardines or salmon with bones, legumes and leafy green vegetables.*

## Other Things to Think About When Planning a Healthy Pregnancy

**Weight** – A healthy lifestyle with regular, enjoyable physical activity and healthy eating will help you achieve a healthy body weight. Talk to a Registered Dietitian or link to Health Canada's website at: [www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/nutrition/bmicalculatorapplet/index.html](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/nutrition/bmicalculatorapplet/index.html) to determine whether or not you have a healthy weight. If you are above or below a healthy weight, talk to a Registered Dietitian about lifestyle changes you can make to reach a healthier body weight before you become pregnant.

**Caffeine** – Caffeine crosses into the baby's blood when you are pregnant or breastfeeding. Take a look at your caffeine intake and keep it to less than 300 milligrams (mg) a day. Instead of caffeinated beverages, drink water, milk, soup and fruit and vegetable juices before and during your pregnancy.

Approximate caffeine content of foods:

- 1 cup of instant coffee – 100 mg
- 1 cup of percolated or filter drip coffee – 200 mg
- 1 cup of strong tea – 100 mg
- 1 cup of weak tea – 25 mg
- 1 can of cola soft drink – 28-64 mg
- 1 dark chocolate bar – 50 mg

**Herbal Teas** – Citrus peel, ginger, lemon balm, orange peel and rose hip herbal teas are generally safe. Have no more than 2-3 cups of these safe herbal teas a day. Chamomile and other herbal teas can have harmful effects on you and your baby.

**Alcohol and other substances** – Alcohol, drugs, inhalants, prescription and over the counter medications can affect the unborn baby. Avoid alcohol and these other substances if you are planning a pregnancy and when you know you are pregnant. Check with your physician or pharmacist before using any medications.

**Smoking** - Smoking during pregnancy is one cause of babies being born premature, smaller and at a lower weight. Try to cut back or quit smoking now, before you become pregnant. Think about all the great reasons to quit! Look for smoking cessation programs in your area.

**Artificial Sweeteners** – Aspartame (found in *Equal* and *Nutrasweet*), sucralose (found in *Splenda*) and acesulfame-potassium are used in many foods such as soft drinks, desserts, yogurt, fruit spreads, salad dressings, chewing gum and candy. Although evidence shows that aspartame, sucralose and acesulfame-potassium are safe for pregnant women, it's wise to use them sparingly. Read food labels to see if artificial sweeteners have been added. Avoid using saccharin or cyclamates.

**Other Situations** - Being a teenager, living alone or in a violent environment, or sometimes not having enough money for food can affect your health. Please call your local health department or community health centre. They offer free programs that provide support, food, nutrition counselling and information on different lifestyle issues. If you have a medical condition, such as high blood pressure, diabetes or HIV, contact your health care professional and a Registered Dietitian **before** becoming pregnant.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Visit the Dietitians of Canada website at [www.dietitians.ca](http://www.dietitians.ca)

Find a consulting Registered Dietitian in your area on the DC website or by calling 1-888-901-7776

Call your local health department or community health centre

Visit the Health Canada website at [www.hc-sc.gc.ca](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca) for a copy of their publication *Nutrition for a Healthy Pregnancy. National Guidelines for the Childbearing Years.*

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