



Nutrition in Pregnancy

Nutrition in Pregnancy - Professor Barry O'Reilly

Going through life having a balanced diet is always important, but this becomes even more important when you are pregnant. The old saying “eating for two” doesn't quite describe the truth about nutrition in pregnancy.

All the foods you consume will be the main sources of nutrients that will nourish your baby. Nowadays, we know that there is a strong relationship between what you eat and your baby's health.

As a woman, it is best to accept that you cannot avoid increasing in size and weight during pregnancy, but you need to understand how to do it in a healthy way.

You need to increase your weight gradually during all the phases of pregnancy. Doctors recommend to gain around 4 pounds in the first trimester, later, you can gain even 4 pounds each month during the other two trimesters. This can be different from woman to woman but it is important to gain weight in a balanced, healthy manner.



The World Health Organisation (WHO) says that the insufficient weight increase of the mother due to an inadequate nutrition in pregnancy increases the risk of premature birth, congenital malformations, and low birth weight.

On the other hand, obesity is also contraindicated. This condition is associated with the risk of developing arterial hypertension (pre-eclampsia), gestational diabetes, and a bigger and heavier baby. This can lead to a complication known as fetal-pelvic disproportion, which can provoke troubles during labour, possibly leading to a caesarean section.

Micronutrients and macronutrients

When you are expecting, you will need more macronutrients and micronutrients. Micronutrients are substances or chemical elements that are required by living organisms, for healthy development and growth. Some examples are calcium, iron, and folic acid.

Macronutrients provide you with the energy that your body needs. Examples of macronutrients are carbohydrates, fats, and proteins. In most cases, you will need to ingest some prescribed nutrients to fulfill your body's necessities during pregnancy.

Micronutrients

One of the most important micronutrients that you will need is folic acid, which will prevent some congenital malformations in a structure called the neural tube, which is located at the base of the baby's Central Nervous System. Insufficient folic acid can result in malformations such as spina bifida or cranial issues.



1. Folic acid

The WHO recommends consuming around 0.4 mg of folic acid per day while pregnant. It also suggests starting with the folic acid ingestion even before conception in order to prevent all the possible malformations. You can find it in green vegetables such as broccoli, spinach, chard, and some fruits and whole grains.

2. Iron

Iron is another very important micronutrient. This is an essential mineral that helps to transport oxygen to the different tissues of the organism. Your iron levels need to be adequate because your baby will need a lot of oxygen to generate healthy cells. Also, low iron levels could lead to anaemia. According to the WHO, at least 40% of pregnant women worldwide develop anaemia. To prevent this complication, the WHO recommends consuming between 30 and 60 mg of iron orally per day.

Animal proteins such as chicken, meat, pork, and fish are rich in iron foods. You can also find this mineral in dark green vegetables, egg yolks, and beans like lentils and kidney beans. Your doctor may prescribe you combined supplements with the proper amount of folic acid and iron.

3. Calcium

Calcium is another vital micronutrient during pregnancy. If you do not intake sufficient quantities of calcium, your baby's system will absorb calcium from your bones. This can lead to osteoporosis and other illnesses produced by its deficit.

According to the UNICEF, the recommended amount of calcium is around 1200 mg each day during pregnancy. We obtain most parts of calcium consuming dairy products, but we can also find high levels of it in vegetables, whole grains, fruits, and beans.

4. Iodine

Iodine plays a crucial role in the creation of thyroid hormones, which contribute to the growth and development of the fetus. But be careful with its levels. Low levels of iodine will generate problems in the baby's immature nervous system, however, high levels can produce problems with the baby's thyroid gland.

In general, food contains low levels of this mineral, this is why the WHO and UNICEF recommended the universal iodisation of salt many years ago. In countries where this rule is not applied, 20% of pregnant women have problems related to iodine levels. In these cases, doctors must prescribe an oral supplement.



Macronutrients

It is not necessary to have a strict diet to have a proper nutrition in pregnancy, just having a varied, healthy diet should be enough. However, you need to eat the proper quantity of macros.

1. Carbohydrates

The perfect meal should have between 50 and 55% of carbohydrates. These are the main source of energy and must be the base of your diet, even more so when you are pregnant. Cereals, bread, pasta, rice, and potatoes are excellent sources of carbohydrates.

2. Protein

Another important macronutrient is protein, which should be between 15 to 20% of your daily calorie intake. Proteins are necessary to create new tissues. You can find proteins of both animal and vegetable, making it easy to choose proteins according to your own personal taste and lifestyle.

3. Fats

Last but not least, are fats. Their proportion should be around 30% of your daily meals. When we talk about fats, we are referring to good fats. For example, food that includes Omega-3 fatty acids and HDL cholesterol, which can be found in fish and nuts. Also, olive oil is a great source of healthy fats. Remember, fats are necessary, but just the healthy ones.

As you can see, having proper nutrition in pregnancy is not as hard as you may think. Most of the time, having a balanced diet is enough.