

Do I Need to Take Calcium, Vit D, Folic Acid and Iron Supplements?



A healthy diet will help the expectant and new mother to feel fit and healthy and it will help the baby to develop and grow. Read about a healthy and safe diet in our handouts “A Healthy Diet in Pregnancy”, “Eating Safely in Pregnancy”, and “Nutrition for Nursing Mothers” . What about taking supplements? Some doctors advise every pregnant woman and nursing mother to take multivitamins. Others advise to supplement as and when there is a need. Below information on knowing whether or not you need to take calcium, vit D, folic acid and iron supplements.

Calcium:

Calcium is important to protect and preserve your bones as well as for the development of your baby’s skeleton. Insufficient calcium consumption may lead to poor bone health. Calcium supplementation in pregnancy might reduce the risk of pregnancy-induced hypertension, it might protect against low-birth weight and it might prevent hypertension in the next generation.

Some women fear that calcium consumption causes the head of the baby to be hard and increase the chance of a complicated birth. There is no good basis for such thinking. Suture lines on the baby’s head allow for the skull bones to overlap slightly during the baby’s passage through the birth canal.

Pregnant women and nursing mothers need 1000 mg of calcium per day.

If you are younger than 19, you need 1300 mg of calcium per day.

The first question to ask is: Does my diet contain enough calcium?

Milk products are a good source of calcium, but so are other foods (see schedule below):

Food product	Calcium	Food product	Calcium
one cup of milk:	300 mg	one cup of yoghurt	450 mg
30 g hard cheese:	200 mg	one cup cooked spinach:	240 mg
one cup cooked broccoli:	180 mg	one cup raw bok choy:	40 mg
one cup kiwi:	50 mg	one cup dried figs:	300 mg
100 g tofu:	350 mg	half a cup cooked soybeans:	100 mg
half a cup cooked legumes:	15-50 mg	one spoon sesame seeds:	88 mg
30 g almonds:	75 mg	30 g sunflower seeds:	50 mg
one cup brown rice:	50 mg	85 g sardine:	324 mg
86 g (one can) pink salmon:	181 mg		

You can search the internet to find out about other sources of calcium. If you consume enough calcium, then there is no need to take calcium supplements. However, if you don’t drink three cups of milk products per day and/or you don’t eat sufficient other products rich in calcium, then calcium supplementation is recommended: 500 mg of calcium 1-3 times a day. Ask your family doctor for advice.



Vitamin D:

Vitamin D is important for the absorption of calcium and will help to prevent rickets in your baby and keep your teeth and bones healthy. Recent research shows an association between vitamin D sufficiency and better pregnancy outcomes. Vitamin D deficiency in the healthy baby seems to be associated with an increased risk of RSV in the first year of life.

Vitamin D is produced in your skin when you are exposed to sunlight. The best way to get vitamin D is through exposure to the sun (at least half an hour per day with bare arms). Vitamin D is also found in oily fish, butter, and fortified margarine. Eggs contain some vitamin D. Should you take vit D supplements during pregnancy and nursing? Do talk to your midwife or doctor about this.

There are different lines of thought about this:

- All pregnant and lactating women should take a daily supplement of 10-40 microgram vit D
- Women with a dark skin or who aren't exposed to sunlight (with bare arms) for at least half an hour per day should take a daily supplement of 10-40 microgram vit D
- Determine blood serum levels of all pregnant women and new mothers. Supplement vitamin D according to test results and under supervision of your family doctor:

Vit D serum levels:	Vit D supplement:
More than 50 nmol/l	10 microgram = 400 IU
30-50 nmol/l	20 microgram = 800 IU
Less than 30 nmol/l	70 microgram = 2800 IU

(check levels again after 8 weeks)

Folic Acid:

To decrease the risk of your baby being born with a neural tube defect, take a daily supplement of 0.4 mg of folic acid from three months before conception (start when you plan to have a baby) till the third month of pregnancy. Also eat food sources rich in folate, like spinach, lettuce, cabbage, green beans, cauliflower, and fortified cereals.

Iron:

Anaemia is a common problem in pregnancy. Anaemia might lead to fatigue, being short of breath while exercising, dizziness, and being more susceptible to infections. To prevent anaemia, you should eat plenty of foods rich in iron and vitamin C (vit C aids with the absorption of iron). Fruit and vegetables contain plenty of vitamin C. The best sources of iron are lean meats, especially liver and kidney. However, limit the amount of liver consumption during pregnancy (see our handout "Eating Safely in Pregnancy"). Other sources of iron are eggs, green leafy vegetables, cooked beans and peas.

Tea and coffee reduce the ability to absorb iron, so try to drink them between meals rather than when eating iron rich foods. During your pregnancy your blood will be tested for anaemia. If you're anaemic your doctor will prescribe iron supplements. Iron supplements may cause constipation and nausea. Taking them with meals might reduce these side effects.

Please notice: if you're already taking multivitamins, please check if they contain calcium, vit D, folic acid and/or iron to avoid supplementing too much!

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