

Nutritional tips before and during pregnancy

TIPS PRIOR TO PREGNANCY

- **Achieve and maintain a healthy body weight.**
Pre-pregnancy obesity is an independent risk factor for neural tube defects, stillbirth and preterm birth; while maternal obesity is associated with a more than doubled risk of stillbirth and perinatal death.
- **Do not use alcohol.**
By the time you learn you are pregnant your pregnancy will already have progressed quite a few weeks. So stop drinking when you are planning your pregnancy.

Drinking alcohol during pregnancy can cause a wide range of physical and mental birth defects. Although many women are aware that heavy drinking during pregnancy can cause birth defects, many do not realise that moderate or even light drinking may also harm their unborn baby. No level of alcohol use during pregnancy has been proven safe. When a pregnant woman drinks, alcohol passes through the placenta to her baby. In the baby's immature body, alcohol is broken down much more slowly than in an adult's body. As a result, the alcohol level of the baby's blood can be higher and remain elevated longer than the level in the mother's blood. This sometimes causes the baby to suffer lifelong damage.

- **Eat iron rich foods** (such as lean meat, liver, enriched breakfast cereals) regularly; **include vitamin C rich foods at meals** to enhance absorption of iron (orange juice).
Anaemia in pregnancy is common and it is most often caused by an iron deficiency. The body builds a store of iron in the liver, by eating more of this mineral before pregnancy a woman can ensure her stores of iron are maximised, thus helping her to prevent an iron deficiency during pregnancy.

Pregnant women need more iron for a variety of reasons. The biggest reason is that iron helps the body make new blood to carry the oxygen and nutrients to the baby during pregnancy.

Maternal anaemia is linked to an increased risk of adverse outcomes during pregnancy, including low birth weight and premature deliveries. It's more difficult to prevent anaemia developing during pregnancy if women are anaemic before falling pregnant, which is why adopting a healthy, balanced diet before conceiving is so important.

- **Eat foods rich in folate**, such as lentils, dry beans, spinach, broccoli, orange, bread and maize (all bread and maize in South Africa is fortified with vitamins and minerals, including folate).
- **Take a folic acid supplement daily.**
Neural tube defects (NTDs) are one of the most common birth defects. A NTD

is an opening in the spinal cord or brain that occurs very early in human development. In the 2nd week of pregnancy specialised cells of the foetus begin to fuse and form the neural tube. When the neural tube does not close completely, an NTD develops.

It is important to note that during the first four weeks of pregnancy (when most women do not even realize that they are pregnant), adequate folic intake is essential for the proper closure of the neural tube. Women who are planning to become pregnant are advised to eat foods rich in folic acid, and / or take a suitable supplement. Excess intake can be dangerous, so supplements should be recommended by a knowledgeable health professional.

TIPS DURING PREGNANCY

- **Continue to follow the tips given prior to pregnancy.**
- **Monitor weight gain to achieve a gain within recommended levels.** Women are often concerned about weight gain during pregnancy however they do not recognise that appropriate weight gain is essential and could help decrease the risk of certain complications developing during pregnancy.

While too little weight gain is dangerous, excessive weight gain is also associated with health risks. Excess weight gain is linked to gestational diabetes mellitus, preterm delivery and Large for Gestational Age (LGA) babies.

Ask your health care provider how much weight you should be gaining each trimester, and follow the advice of a dietitian to make the changes needed to your eating plan to achieve this.

- **Adapt supplementation if needed**, on the recommendation of a knowledgeable health professional. In South Africa, many women will receive an iron-folic acid supplement routinely in their antenatal care. Many women don't get enough of these two nutrients from their eating plan; iron-rich foods (such as meat) are expensive and folate rich foods are not typically eaten in large amounts. But these nutrients are important as they work together to help prevent anaemia developing during pregnancy.

Some women may be prescribed a calcium supplement, as this helps to prevent them developing pre-eclampsia (high blood pressure).

Excessive amounts of micronutrients can be harmful; do not take supplements that are not needed.

- There is no need to increase food intake in the first trimester. If you often eat foods with a low nutritional value now is the time to improve the quality of your food choices.

- **Do not skip meals;** eat at least three planned meals a day.
- **Protect the quality and safety of your food.** Do not eat foods that have a high risk of being contaminated with microorganisms; examples are leftover foods or foods past their 'best by' date.
- Do not take supplements or products that are not proven safe for use during pregnancy. Products that are labelled "natural" are not necessarily safe.