

Food safety during pregnancy

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Alcohol

The evidence linking alcohol with birth defects is still inconclusive. We know that heavy drinking may be harmful to the baby, particularly during the early stages of pregnancy; however the effect of low to moderate alcohol intake is less clear. Some studies show no effects while others show that even this amount may be harmful. The best advice is to avoid alcohol if possible.

Caffeine containing drinks

Tea, coffee and cola drinks all contain caffeine. There is mixed evidence about the effects of large amounts of caffeine on the developing baby; however moderate amounts appear safe i.e. up to 3 cups of coffee or 5 cups tea or cola drinks. Don't forget cola drinks also contain large quantities of sugar. Some energy drinks can also contain large amounts of caffeine or guarana (a plant that contains caffeine and caffeine-like substances) and are not recommended for pregnant women.

Liver and vitamin A

Liver is a rich source of iron, however only small amounts (50 grams per week at most) are recommended because liver contains very large amounts of vitamin A. Vitamin A in excess can be harmful to the developing baby. There is no danger of excessive vitamin A intake from other foods.

Vitamin supplements also need to be carefully checked for their vitamin A source. Vitamin A comes in two forms; retinol and beta-carotene. beta-carotene is considered safe even in high doses, but supplements containing retinol (the type of vitamin found in liver) should be avoided as the dose may be too high. Check with your pharmacist if in doubt.

Fish and pregnancy

Fish is a good source of omega 3 fatty acids, which are needed for brain and nervous tissue development in the baby. Oily fish such as salmon, sardines, herring, mackerel and tuna are the best sources. There are also smaller amounts of these fatty acids in walnuts, spinach, soybeans, linseeds, and canola (oil and margarine). In general one to three serves per week are recommended for all members of the population. However due to possible higher mercury levels, certain types of fish should be limited.

Shark (flake), broadbill, marlin and swordfish should not be eaten more than once a fortnight by pregnant women, women planning a pregnancy, or children up to 6 years old. If these fish are eaten, no other fish should be eaten during the fortnight. Limit orange roughy (sea perch) or catfish to one serve per week. If they are eaten no other fish should be eaten during that week. Serve sizes are 150g for adults and 75g for young children.

Preventing food related illnesses

The risk of contracting all types of food borne illnesses during pregnancy can be reduced by good food handling practices. These include washing hands before preparing food, ensuring foods are fresh and refrigerated and avoiding cross contamination of raw and cooked foods.

Listeria

Listeria is a bacterium that can contaminate food and cause infection. In pregnant women this infection can be passed on to the baby. Listeria infection is not a common problem and the risk can be minimised by good food handling practices.

Here are some suggestions to help minimise your risk of listeria infection:

- Ensure good hygiene and clean utensils when preparing food.
- Thoroughly wash raw vegetables.
- Avoid foods such as pate, cold cooked chicken and sliced meats, coleslaws and salads (unless you are sure they have been freshly prepared), unpasteurised dairy products, soft cheeses (e.g. brie, camembert, ricotta, feta, blue cheese) soft serve ice-cream, uncooked or smoked seafood and precooked prawns. Freshly cooked seafood is safe.
- Listeria is killed by cooking food to boiling point, so, when reheating foods, make sure they are piping hot.

Toxoplasmosis

Toxoplasmosis is another infection that can affect unborn babies. To reduce the risk meat should be thoroughly cooked and salad vegetables thoroughly washed. Pregnant women should avoid contact with cat faeces and should wear disposable gloves if handling cat litter. Hands should be washed after gardening or handling pets.

Where to get more information

Nutrition & Dietetics

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Women's Health Information Centre

Royal Women's Hospital
Tel: (03) 8345 3045 or 1800 442 007 (rural callers)
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