

Diet and Exercise before, during and after Pregnancy

MotherSafe – Royal Hospital for Women

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Information in this leaflet is general in nature and should not take the place of advice from your health care provider. With every pregnancy there is a 3 to 5% risk of having a baby with a birth defect.

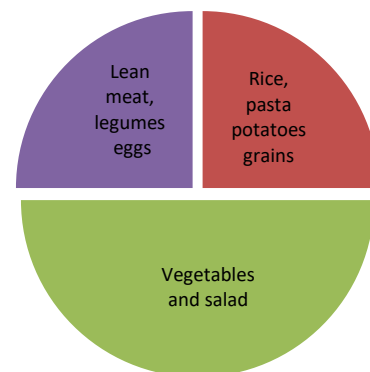
It is important to have a healthy diet and active lifestyle when you are pregnant or planning pregnancy because it can help keep you and your baby healthy. This is particularly so if you are overweight or obese, because obesity may have health consequences for both mother and baby. Therefore, whether you are a healthy weight or are overweight, healthy eating and regular exercise are a priority.

Before pregnancy

Eating well¹ involves the following:

- Make sure your diet is high in a wide variety of fruit and vegetables (including leafy vegetables for folate).
- Eat lean meats and alternatives such as legumes (e.g kidney beans, chickpeas and lentils), tofu, eggs, nuts and seeds.
- Eat reasonable quantities of high quality carbohydrates such as breads, cereals, pasta and rice that are **mostly wholegrain**. These carbohydrates play an important role in a healthy diet **if not overeat**.
- Include dairy products (low fat if medically advised) such as milk, yoghurt and cheese or alternative sources of calcium in your diet every day.
- Limit your quantities of high fat or sugary foods such as fast food, cakes and biscuits.
- Fats such as in canola, olive oil, nuts and avocado are healthy in moderate quantities.
- Drink plenty of water
- It can be helpful to focus on **eating mindfully**. This means increasing your awareness of what you are eating so that you eat when hungry and stop eating when full. It also means enjoying and appreciating your food while you are eating. **Sometimes keeping a food diary can be helpful with this.**
- **Consider portion size as well as food type.** A typical plate of food should be approximately **one half vegetables or salad**, one quarter lean meat or alternatives and one quarter grains, pasta, potato or rice (see diagram above).

Portion Proportion Plate



It may be worthwhile consulting with a dietitian for further support and advice. There is also a free coaching program – the NSW Get Healthy Service- a NSW Government program available at <https://www.gethealthynsw.com.au/program/>

It is also important to address your levels of physical activity.

Be as active as possible and use every opportunity to move. Incorporate a regular exercise routine into your daily life. Guidelines suggest aiming for moderate activity (causing slight increased breathing and heart rate) for at least half an hour every day. Vigorous activity 2 -3 times a week for 30 minutes has additional benefit. Further information can be found in the Physical Activity Australia guidelines²

<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/health-pubhlth-strateg-phys-act-guidelines>

During pregnancy

It is important to look at maintaining a healthy lifestyle while pregnant, incorporating a healthy diet and regular exercise. The aim should be to keep weight gain in the range expected for your weight level particularly if you are overweight or obese (see **Overweight and Obesity before, during and after Pregnancy** in MotherSafe factsheets). Your approach to eating should be similar to before your pregnancy (see **Before pregnancy** section in this factsheet for details).

There is no need to “eat for 2” but equally it is **not** advisable to have a highly restrictive diet. It is important for you and your baby that you eat food that is high in quality of nutrients rather than high in kilojoules.³ For example, it is preferable to choose to eat fruit and vegetables as a snack, rather than fatty, sugary foods such as donuts. Further information can be found in the

Australian dietary Guidelines brochure:

https://www.eatforhealth.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/the_guidelines/n55h_healthy_eating_during_pregnancy.pdf.

Being as **active** as possible as part of your daily routine is a priority. This means taking as many opportunities to walk and to spend less time sitting. It is good to exercise moderately for at least 30 minutes per day (eg a brisk walk which causes a small but noticeable increase in your heart rate and breathing). Vigorous activity is possible for some pregnant women. A recent review of studies confirmed that it is safe to engage in high intensity exercise at 25° for up to 35 minutes at any time in pregnancy.⁴ However it is important to consider your baseline level of fitness and exercise routine before pregnancy and you should check with your doctor or midwife as there may be specific issues for you such as pelvic ligament softening or bleeding. You should also avoid high impact sport or sports with a risk of falling or injury (for example, bungee jumping, horse riding, skiing, cycling). After 16 weeks you should not lie flat while exercising as this can make you feel faint from the baby pressing on your blood vessels.⁵ Some physiotherapists conduct exercise classes and these can be very beneficial. For more detailed guidelines, see RANZCOG – Exercise during Pregnancy at <https://ranzcoq.edu.au/womens-health/patient-information-resources/exercise-during-pregnancy>

After pregnancy

After your pregnancy, it may be difficult to achieve a healthy weight range. Healthy diet, focusing on food of high nutritional quality, an active lifestyle and regular specific exercise, is important. This can be difficult whilst also dealing with the challenges of mothering. **Restrictive dieting is not advisable**, particularly while breastfeeding.

In terms of exercise, consider activities such as walking with your baby in a pram, joining a gym with a crèche or joining an active mothers group. Getting support is important, whether it is from a doctor or dietitian or family and friends.

Getting to a healthy weight range after pregnancy reduces your risks of problems for further pregnancies as well as improving your long-term health. It is worthwhile discussing weight management with your dietitian or doctor if this is a concern for you.

References

1. Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. National Health and Medical Research Council. 2013. The *Australian dietary guidelines*. Canberra: NHMRC; 2013 Available from: <https://www.eatforhealth.gov.au/guidelines> Accessed November 2019
2. Australian Government Department of Health. Australia's physical activity and sedentary behaviour guidelines and the Australian 24-Hour movement guidelines. Canberra. 2019: Available at <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/health-pubhlth-strateg-phys-act-guidelines> Accessed November 2019
3. Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. National Health and Medical Research Council. Eat for health. Healthy eating during your pregnancy. Advice on eating for you and your baby. https://www.eatforhealth.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/the_guidelines/n55h_healthy_eating_during_pregnancy.pdf. Accessed November 2019.
4. Ravanelli N, Casasola W, English T, *et al.* Heat stress and fetal risk. Environmental limits for exercise and passive heat stress during pregnancy: a systematic review with best evidence synthesis. *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 2019;53:799-805.
5. The Royal Australian College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. (online) 2016. Exercise during pregnancy. C-Obs 62. Available at [https://ranzocog.edu.au/RANZCOG_SITE/media/RANZCOG-MEDIA/Women%27s%20Health/Statement%20and%20guidelines/Clinical-Obstetrics/Exercise-during-pregnancy-\(C-Obs-62\)-New-July-2016.pdf?ext=.pdf](https://ranzocog.edu.au/RANZCOG_SITE/media/RANZCOG-MEDIA/Women%27s%20Health/Statement%20and%20guidelines/Clinical-Obstetrics/Exercise-during-pregnancy-(C-Obs-62)-New-July-2016.pdf?ext=.pdf) Accessed November 2019

Other resources

Get Healthy Information and Coaching Service. Get Healthy in Pregnancy. Available at <https://www.gethealthynsw.com.au/program/get-healthy-in-pregnancy/> or phone 1300806258

Dietetics Association of Australia. Smart eating fast facts. Pregnancy. Available at <http://daa.asn.au/for-the-public/smart-eating-for-you/nutrition-a-z/pregnancy/>

Victoria state government. Better Health Channel- Pregnancy and exercise- <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/HealthyLiving/pregnancy-and-exercise>

Sports Medicine Australia. Position statement. Exercise in pregnancy and the postpartum period. 2016 <https://sma.org.au/sma-site-content/uploads/2017/08/SMA-Position-Statement-Exercise-Pregnancy.pdf>

Victoria State Government. Better Health Channel. Breastfeeding and your diet. Available at <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/breastfeeding-and-your-diet>



NSW Medications in Pregnancy & Breastfeeding Service

For more information call MotherSafe: NSW Medications in Pregnancy and Breastfeeding Service on 9382 6539 (Sydney Metropolitan Area) or 1800 647 848 (Non-Metropolitan Area) Monday -Friday 9am-5pm (excluding public holidays)