

Healthy Eating for Pregnancy



Plain English
Approved by NALA

The Health Promotion Unit of the Department of Health and Children acknowledges and thanks the Paediatric Interest Group of the Irish Nutrition and Dietetic Institute for their expertise in developing this leaflet and also thanks the Community Dietitian Managers in Health Promotion in each Health Service Executive Area and the Food Safety Authority of Ireland for their input.



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Why healthy eating is important

During pregnancy your unborn baby gets all their nutrients from you. Healthy food choices **before**, **during** and **after** pregnancy help:

- **you** stay healthy and well; and
- **your baby** grow healthy and strong.

If you are planning a pregnancy, good diet and a healthy lifestyle will help your body prepare for the pregnancy and give your baby a good start.

Healthy eating during pregnancy may also protect your baby against diseases in later life.

During pregnancy you need extra energy and nutrients. You do not need to eat for two, but you will need to eat regular meals with a variety of foods. What you eat is as important as how much you eat.

This booklet gives you general information on healthy eating during pregnancy. Talk to your doctor or midwife if you have any medical conditions, such as diabetes, or if you follow a special diet or have had a baby recently. You may also need to talk to a dietitian.

Always check with your doctor, midwife or pharmacist before taking any medication or supplements when pregnant.

Weight gain and pregnancy

It is good to start your pregnancy at a healthy weight. Do not try to lose weight during your pregnancy.

You will need to put on at least 7kg (15 lbs) while pregnant to cover the growth of your baby. The average weight gain during pregnancy is 11.5 to 12.5kg (25 to 28 lbs). Most of this weight gain will take place in the second half of your pregnancy.

If you are underweight, you may need to gain more weight than outlined here.

If you are overweight, you may need to gain less. Your doctor, midwife or dietitian will be able to advise you.

Regular gentle physical activity, such as walking or swimming, will help you gain a healthy weight during pregnancy. If you have raised blood pressure, speak to your doctor or midwife before beginning any physical activity.



Nutrients that need special attention during pregnancy

A healthy varied diet is important for you and your baby. The following nutrients are particularly important:

- folic acid,
- iron and vitamin C,
- calcium and vitamin D, and
- omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids.

Folic acid

Folic acid is an important vitamin for a healthy pregnancy. It helps prevent conditions such as spina bifida and other neural tube defects (NTDs) – problems that can affect the baby's spine. Spina bifida and NTDs are caused when the neural tube, which will become the baby's spine, does not form properly in early pregnancy.

Folic acid is most important in the months before becoming pregnant and the first 12 weeks of your pregnancy.

During this time you need to take a tablet that contains **400 micrograms (400µg) of folic acid** every day.

If there is a family history of spina bifida or NTDs or if you are taking medication for epilepsy, your doctor will need to prescribe a higher dose of folic acid.

Start taking folic acid tablets **today** if you are planning a pregnancy or if you are pregnant and have not yet started taking folic acid. It is also a good idea to take folic acid tablets if there is any chance that you might become pregnant – even if you are not planning a pregnancy now.

Continue taking folic acid tablets until your first appointment at the maternity hospital. Your doctor or midwife can tell you whether you need to continue taking folic acid after this time.

You can buy folic acid tablets over the counter from your chemist or you can get them free of charge on prescription from your doctor if you have a medical card.

You can also get folic acid directly from your diet. You should eat foods rich in folates (the form of folic acid found in food) every day as well as taking folic acid tablets.



Good sources of folates

- Green vegetables, such as broccoli, brussels sprouts and spinach
- Beans and peas
- Some fruits, such as oranges
- Yeast or malt extract

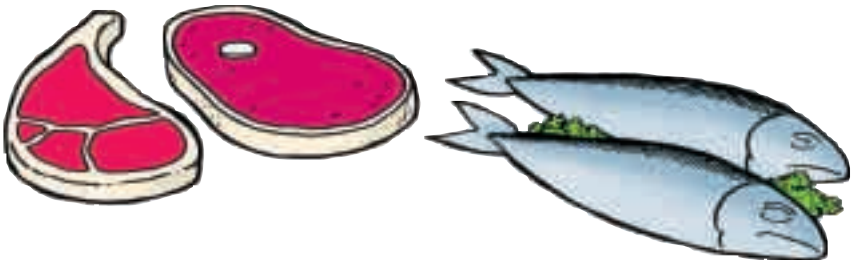
Some brands of bread, breakfast cereal, milk and other foods may have folic acid added to them. Read the packaging to check.

Iron and vitamin C

Iron is important to help make the extra blood needed by you and your baby. Vitamin C is also important and it helps your body use the iron from food.

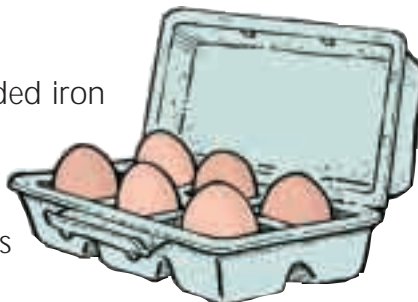
Good sources of iron

- Red meat, such as beef, lamb and pork
- Chicken and fish



Other (non-meat) sources of iron

- Eggs
- Breakfast cereals with added iron
- Pulses, such as beans, peas and lentils
- Dried fruit, such as prunes and apricots
- Green vegetables, such as broccoli and spinach



Aim to eat iron-rich foods every day.

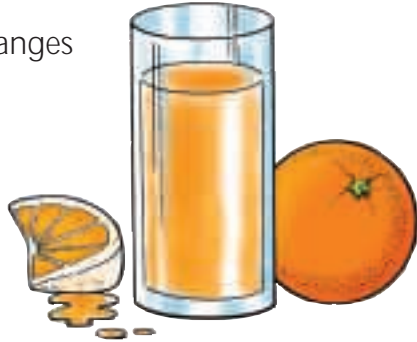
If you do not eat meat, make sure you include non-meat sources of iron every day combined with food rich in vitamin C to help your body use the iron.

You may also need iron tablets, particularly if you have had a baby in the last year or two. Ask your doctor or midwife to advise you.

Some foods, such as high-fibre cereal, milk, tea and coffee, reduce your body's ability to use iron. Try not to have these at the same time as you take iron tablets or eat foods that are rich in iron.

Good sources of vitamin C

- Citrus fruits, such as oranges
- Kiwis
- Berries
- Tomatoes
- Juice made from fruits rich in vitamin C
- Potatoes
- Peppers
- Green vegetables, such as broccoli, brussels sprouts and spinach



Include at least 2 servings of fruits or vegetables rich in vitamin C as part of your 5 or more servings of fruit and vegetables each day.

Examples of a serving include:

- 1 medium-sized fruit, such as an orange,
- 2 small fruits, for example 2 kiwis, or
- 1 glass of fruit juice.

When preparing vegetables, be careful not to over-cook them, as this reduces the amount of vitamin C they contain.

One good way to combine vitamin C and iron is to try drinking a glass of orange juice with cereal or a boiled egg. This helps your body make the most of the iron in these foods.

Calcium and vitamin D

Calcium is important for healthy bones and teeth. Vitamin D helps your body to use the calcium from food.

Good sources of calcium

- Milk
- Hard cheese, such as cheddar
- Yogurt

Calcium may be added to some brands of breakfast cereals, bread, orange juice and Irish flour. Read the packaging to check.

Only small amounts of calcium are found in dark green leafy vegetables such as broccoli and cabbage.

Eat at least 5 servings of calcium-rich food each day when pregnant and breastfeeding.

Examples of one serving include:

- 200ml (1/3 pint or an average glass) of milk,
- 30g (1oz or a matchbox size piece) of hard cheese, and
- 125g (4oz pot) of yogurt.



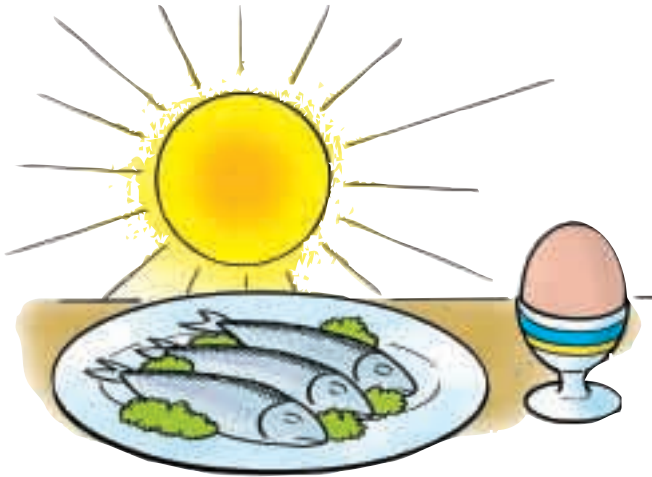
You can make sure you include calcium by having:

- milk as a drink or on cereal,
- milk-based drinks, such as milk shakes,
- soups made with milk,
- sauces made with milk or with natural yogurt added,
- cheese as a snack or in a sandwich, or
- cheese added to savoury dishes, such as pizza.

Choose low-fat dairy products – they have the same amount of calcium as higher-fat products.

Only use pasteurised milk, and dairy products such as cheese, butter or yogurt made from pasteurised milk.

If you use soya alternatives to dairy foods, choose those with added calcium.



Good sources of vitamin D

- Oily fish, such as herring, mackerel and sardines
- Egg yolks
- Small amounts of everyday sunlight – vitamin D is made in the body when skin is exposed to sunlight

Some brands of milk, breakfast cereal and margarine may have vitamin D added to them. Read the packaging to check.

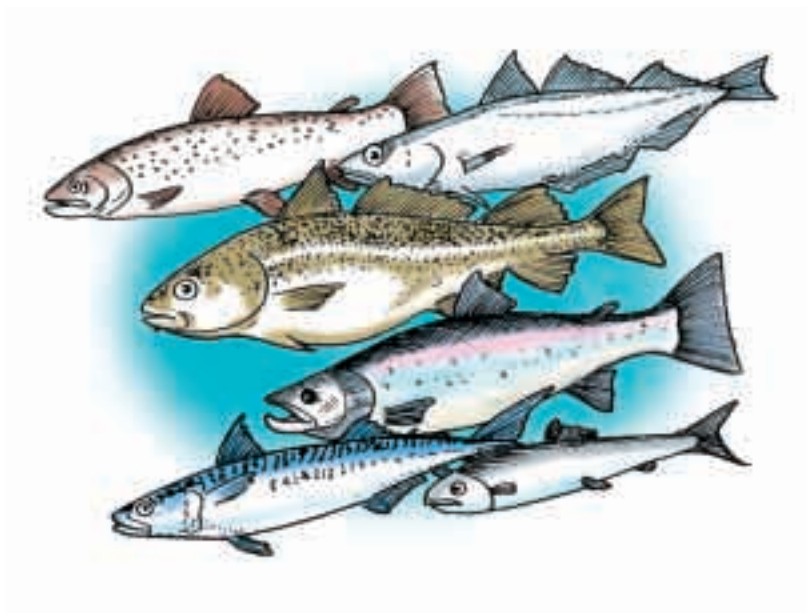
If you are dark skinned, get no exposure to the sunlight or do not eat foods rich in vitamin D, ask your doctor or midwife if you need to take vitamin D tablets.

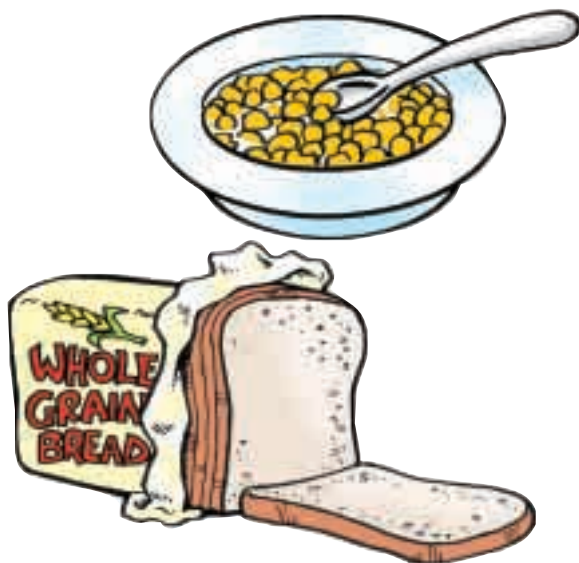
Omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids

Omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids are important for developing your baby's brain and eyes.

Good sources of fatty acids

- Oily fish, such as herring, mackerel, salmon, sardines and trout
- White fish, such as cod and whiting
- Some vegetable oils, such as rapeseed (canola), flaxseed, linseed and walnut - used in small amounts when cooking





Other sources of fatty acids

- Meat, chicken and eggs
- Seeds, such as sunflower, safflower, pumpkin and sesame
- Vegetables
- Wholegrain breads and breakfast cereals

Aim to eat 1 portion of oily fish each week. A portion is a piece of fish weighing 90g (3oz). If you do not eat oily fish, include other sources of omega-3 and omega-6 in your diet from the list above.

White fish is also good for you. Eat 1 portion of white fish such as cod or whiting each week.

Using the food pyramid to plan



The food pyramid shows you how much of the different types of food you should be eating every day. The recommended daily servings are highlighted next to each shelf of the food pyramid. For example to get 5 servings from the fruit and vegetable shelf you could have:

an healthy meals

Foods, snacks and drinks that are high in fat or sugar

Choose very small amounts. Choose fats that are high in monounsaturates or polyunsaturates. Only have small amounts of high-fat or high-sugar snacks and drinks. Limit fried food to 1 or 2 times a week. Don't eat them too often.

Meat, fish, eggs and alternatives

Choose any 3 when pregnant (2 at other times).
Use lean meat or trim off the fat. Eat 1 portion of oily fish and 1 portion of white fish each week.

Milk, cheese and yogurt


Choose any 5 when pregnant (3 at other times).
Low-fat options are best (except for young children).

Fruit and vegetables

Choose any 5 each day.
Choose green leafy vegetables and citrus fruit frequently.
Fruit juice only counts for one serving each day.

Bread, cereals and potatoes

Choose any 6 or more each day.
Eat these foods at each meal – high fibre is best.



1 glass of fruit juice	= 1
3 dessertspoons of vegetables	= 1
1 apple	= 1
1 bowl of homemade vegetable soup	= 1
2 kiwis	= 1
Total	= 5 servings

What's in a serving

Foods, snacks and drinks that are high in fat or sugar

What's in a serving?

25g (1oz) low-fat spread

12.5g (1/2oz) margarine or butter

Use oils sparingly.

Limit fried food to 1 or 2 times a week – oven bake instead.

Only eat small amounts of high-fat and high-sugar snacks. Don't eat them too often.

Meat, fish, eggs and alternatives

What's in a serving?

50g (2oz) cooked lean meat or chicken

75g (3oz) cooked fish

2 eggs (not more than 7 a week)

50g (2oz) cheese

75g (3oz) nuts

Milk, cheese and yogurt

What's in a serving?

200ml (1/3 pint) of milk

1 carton of yogurt

Milk pudding made with 200ml (1/3 pint) of milk

25g (1oz) cheddar, blarney or edam cheese

Fruit and vegetables

What's in a serving?

1 small glass of fruit juice

1 medium-sized fresh fruit (apple, orange, banana)

2 small-sized fresh fruits (plums, mandarins, kiwis)

3-4 dessertspoons of cooked vegetables or salad, including peas and beans

Small bowl of homemade vegetable soup

3 dessertspoons of tinned fruit (not in syrup)

Bread, cereal and potatoes

What's in a serving?

1 bowl of cereal

1 slice of bread

3 dessertspoons of pasta or rice

1 medium boiled or baked potato

Daily eating plan – the food pyramid way

Breakfast

- Cereal with low-fat milk
- Bread or toast*
- Fruit juice

Mid-morning

- Fruit, bread* or scone
- Juice, milk or water

Lunch or tea

- Cheese, egg, lean meat, chicken, beans or fish
- Plenty of salad or vegetables
- Bread or roll*
- Yogurt or glass of milk
- Fresh fruit
- Water, milk or yogurt drink

Mid-afternoon

- Fresh fruit, cheese
- Juice, milk or water

Main meal

- Fish, chicken, lean meat, eggs, beans or peas
- Plenty of vegetables
- Potatoes, rice or pasta
- Yogurt
- Fresh, cooked or tinned fruit
- Milk or water

Supper

- Milky drink or water

*Try to eat wholemeal bread if possible.

Drink water regularly - at least 8 glasses a day.

Folic acid is an essential ingredient in making a baby. Take a folic acid tablet (400 Micrograms) each day during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy.

Food safety

Food safety is very important. Always practise good food hygiene.

When buying food

- Check the expiry dates on food.
- When eating out, check that raw vegetables, salads and unpeeled fruits have been washed in clean water.
- Avoid foods if you are not sure about their safety or cleanliness, for example avoid whipped ice-cream or ready-to-eat salads.

When storing food

- Store foods at the correct temperature.
- Separate raw foods from ready-to-eat foods.
- Store raw foods on the bottom shelves of your fridge.



When preparing food

- Wash and dry your hands thoroughly before touching food and after handling raw food, particularly meat, chicken and fish.
- Wash raw fruit and vegetables in clean water before eating.
- Check expiry dates on foods.
- Heat ready meals according to the instructions on their packaging until they are steaming hot throughout.
- Cook all meat, chicken and fish until it is well done.
- Never re-heat food more than once.

Always wear gloves when gardening or handling cat litter before meal times.

Food and drinks to avoid during pregnancy

There are some foods you should avoid during pregnancy. Most of them are healthy foods, but they have sometimes caused illness that could affect your unborn baby.

Raw or lightly-cooked eggs and foods that contain them

- Examples include home-made mayonnaise, mousse and ice cream. The versions you find in shops are often pasteurised and so are safe to eat – read the packaging to check.
- When cooking eggs, make sure to cook them until both the yolk and white are solid.

Unpasteurised milk and dairy products, including soft, mould-ripened cheese

- Examples of cheeses to avoid are camembert, brie and blue-veined cheese. However, cheddar, cottage and processed cheeses should all be safe to eat, as they are made with pasteurised milk – read the packaging to check.

Raw or undercooked meat, poultry, fish and shellfish

- Meat and fish that are 'smoked' or 'cured' are also unsuitable, unless they are fully cooked before eating.

Paté

- Avoid meat and vegetable varieties.

Other foods and drinks to avoid or limit

Shark, swordfish and marlin

- These are not suitable because they may contain high levels of mercury.
- Tuna may also contain mercury, so do not eat more than 2 medium-sized cans 140g (5oz) drained weight or 1 fresh tuna steak 140g (5oz) cooked weight a week.

Excess vitamin A and liver

- Vitamin A is an essential nutrient, but high amounts are not recommended during pregnancy. Avoid multivitamin tablets that may contain high levels of Vitamin A.
- Because liver is high in vitamin A, you should avoid it and its products, such as fish liver oils, liver pâté and liver sausage.



Peanuts

- If there is a family history of allergy, you may help prevent your baby from developing a nut allergy by avoiding peanuts during pregnancy and while breastfeeding.



Alcohol

- The less you drink, the better for you and your baby.
- Cutting out alcohol altogether during pregnancy takes away any possible risk of damage to your baby from it.

Caffeine

- Do not drink more than 4 cups or glasses of caffeine-containing drinks such as coffee, tea, cola or energy drinks a day.
- Avoid medications that contain caffeine – check the label or ask your pharmacist for more information.

Herbal teas and herbal remedies

- If you choose to drink herbal tea, use tea bags and avoid making it too strong. Also, do not drink more than 2 cups a day.
- Avoid herbal remedies and preparations unless a qualified professional has advised that they are safe. Some are not suitable during pregnancy.

Tips for managing common pregnancy complaints

Morning sickness

This feeling of sickness can happen at any time of the day, but usually settles after the first 3 months.

To manage morning sickness, try some of the following tips.

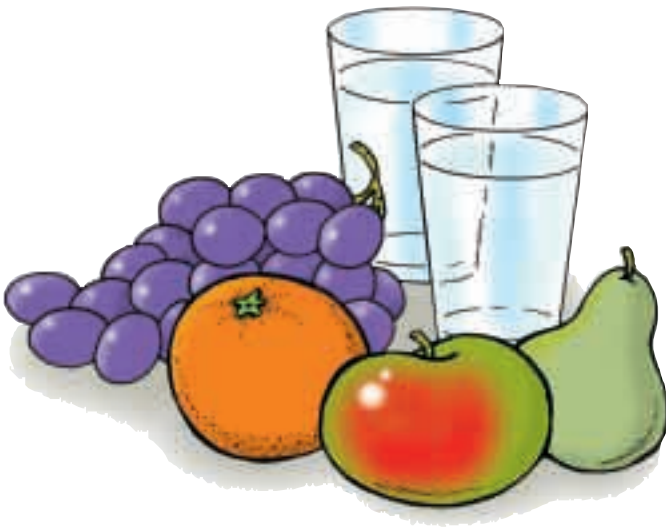
- Eat small starchy snacks, such as plain crackers or biscuits between meals to settle your stomach.
- Drink plenty of fluids throughout the day – between meals rather than with meals.
- Get fresh air and avoid the smell of food cooking.
- Eat small meals at regular intervals. This may be easier on your stomach than 3 large meals a day.

If your sickness is very bad and makes it difficult to eat and drink as much as you should, ask your doctor or midwife for advice. You may also need to speak to a dietitian.

Constipation

Constipation and piles (haemorrhoids) are common during pregnancy. A high-fibre diet with lots of fluids can help.

- Choose high-fibre foods such as wholewheat or wholegrain varieties of breakfast cereal, bread, pasta and rice.
- Eat at least 5 servings of fruit and vegetables each day. Include at least 1 serving with meals and snack on fruit between meals.
- Drink at least 8 to 10 glasses of water or clear fluids each day.
- Take regular, gentle exercise. Choose an activity you enjoy, such as walking or swimming.



Heartburn

Heartburn affects many women during pregnancy. The following tips may help reduce it.

- Eat small meals regularly. This may be easier than 3 large meals a day.
- Eat slowly and chew food well.
- Avoid fatty, fried or highly-seasoned foods.
- Avoid fizzy drinks and drinks containing caffeine, such as tea and coffee.
- Avoid positions that make the problem worse, for example lying flat.

If your heartburn is very bad, contact your doctor or midwife.

Food cravings

You may experience cravings for particular foods while you are pregnant.

- Try to include the food that you crave as part of your meals.
- Avoid eating too much of any one food.
- If you have a craving for a non-food item, ask your doctor or midwife for advice.



Healthy eating after pregnancy

Making healthy food choices after your baby is born will help you:

- keep up your energy levels at this busy time,
- build up your body's stores of nutrients, and
- reach and maintain a healthy weight.

You can continue to follow most of the advice for healthy eating during pregnancy after your baby is born.

Reaching a healthy weight

Use the food pyramid on page 14 to help you choose healthy foods.

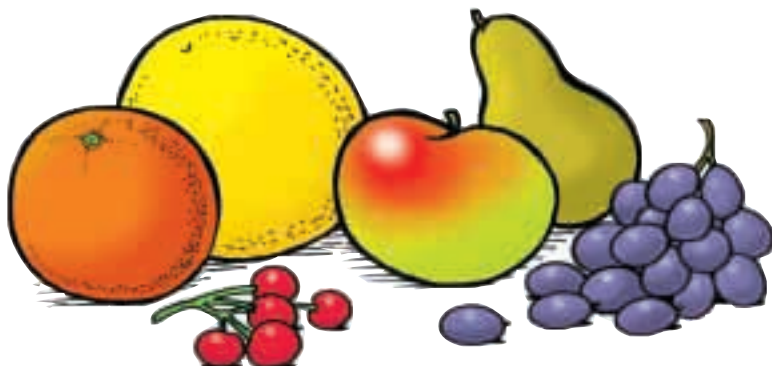
- Breastfeeding uses up the fat that your body stored during pregnancy and helps you return to your pre-pregnancy figure faster.
- If you do not breastfeed, eat smaller portions.
- Avoid fatty and sugary snacks.
- Include physical activity in your daily routine. Try to walk every day with your baby – the fresh air is good for both of you and you get exercise.

Caring for a new baby is hard work. Strict diets may leave you feeling tired and finding it hard to cope. Aim to lose no more than 1kg (1 – 2lbs) a week.

Talk to your doctor, public health nurse or a dietitian for more information on reaching a healthy weight.

Healthy food for your baby

Breast milk is the most natural food for your baby. Breastfeeding is good for your health and that of your baby.



Key points for healthy eating during pregnancy

Use the food pyramid to help you eat a healthy and varied diet.

Take 400 microgram (400µg) folic acid tablets.

Make sure your diet includes foods rich in:

- folates,
- iron,
- vitamin C,
- calcium,
- vitamin D, and
- omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids.

The less alcohol you drink the better for your baby.

Practise good food safety.

