



Planning a Pregnancy- Good Nutrition for Preconception

Sinéad Curran BSc MINDI

While good nutrition is important all through life, the benefits of a healthy diet will be good for your baby - even before he or she is conceived.

Simple changes can make a big difference, but it is a good idea to make any changes to your diet and fitness in plenty of time before you become pregnant. Start at least 3-4 months beforehand. This helps to boost your fertility and makes sure that your stores of key nutrients are at their best and that your weight is stable.

Lifestyle changes are just as important for men as for women. Obesity, alcohol intake and nutritional deficiencies can have a negative effect on both male and female fertility- so look at taking these positive steps together.

Weighing it up- get to a healthy weight

Being underweight or overweight makes it harder to become pregnant.

Carrying extra weight during pregnancy also puts you at an increased risk of blood pressure problems, gestational diabetes, a caesarean section or an instrumental delivery. Losing those extra pounds now will make your pregnancy much healthier for you and your baby. Crash diets are a bad idea, however, as you will miss out on nourishment.

If you are underweight or very lean with a low percentage body fat, your hormone profile can be affected. Your stores of key nutrients are also likely to be low. Improve your nutritional balance by following the Healthy Eating Guidelines in the Food Pyramid or check out other fact sheets on the INDI website. Consult a dietitian for individual advice.

Folic Acid- take a supplement every day

Folic acid is a B vitamin that plays a crucial role in the formation of the spinal cord and brain by helping the neural tube to close over properly. You need good stores to be in place at the time of **conception** for folic acid to be of most benefit in preventing neural tube defects (spina bifida and hydrocephalus).

Simply start taking a 400mcg folic acid tablet every day at least 10-12 weeks **before** you plan to get pregnant. Continue to take it until week 12-14 of your pregnancy. If you take medication for epilepsy or have any medical conditions, you may need a higher prescription dose. Check with your GP.

Iron- eat more iron rich foods

Most women in Ireland don't eat enough iron rich foods. Including rich sources like lean red meat, chicken, turkey and oily fish several times a week will help to boost your stores. Including plenty of vitamin C from fruits and veg and cutting down on your tannin (tea, red wine) boosts your iron absorption. Iron tablets are not recommended in the early weeks of pregnancy, so it is best to improve your diet first. Vegans or vegetarians need to pay close attention to their iron sources. Check out the Vegetarian advice and Women and Iron fact sheets on the INDI website.

Calcium & Vitamin D- include dairy foods and get 20 minutes daylight every day

Studies show that Irish women don't eat enough of these key nutrients. Good stores are needed for baby's development and to protect mother's bones. Be sure to eat at least 3 servings of dairy foods (milk, cheese, yogurt) every day to meet your calcium needs. Vitamin D is found in foods like oily fish, margarines, cheese and eggs. It is also made in the skin through the action of sunlight. Just 20 minutes daylight on hands and face



everyday will help to boost your stores. Consider a quick walk at lunchtime or in the morning- it will help your fitness too!

Alcohol- cut it down or cut it out

Alcohol intakes higher than the guideline of 14 units a week for women and 21units a week for men may have a negative effect on fertility for both men and women.

Excessive alcohol is harmful to your baby's development, and the early days and weeks of life (when you may not know that you are pregnant) are most sensitive to even moderate amounts of alcohol. Alcohol is also a major source of calories with little nutritional benefit, so cutting it out of your diet will be an added bonus if you are overweight.

Smoking- quit now

Smoking cigarettes reduces your fertility. Smoking when pregnant is harmful to your baby and is linked with low birth weight and premature birth. Smoking also means low levels of Vitamin C- a nutrient needed for good iron absorption. If you smoke, quit now – don't wait for the positive pregnancy test.

Other things to consider:

Exercise and activity is also part of a healthy lifestyle. Improving your fitness and muscle strength before you get pregnant helps you to avoid back and joint pains during pregnancy and is good preparation for labour.

As you may be pregnant for a few weeks before you know that you are, following food safety guidelines is a good idea while you are planning your pregnancy. Also, many 'natural' or herbal remedies and vitamin supplements may not be suitable at this time. Check with your doctor about these, and about the safety of any prescription medications.

If you have a medical condition such as diabetes, coeliac disease, PKU, cystic fibrosis, thyroid or kidney disease, it is vital that you have good ***preconception advice*** from your medical team, as your health and your baby's development can be affected if your condition isn't well controlled.

Remember, a healthy lifestyle is good preparation for both men and women - and start to make changes in plenty of time.

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