

# Avoiding nutrient deficiencies during pregnancy for a healthier bump

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PREGNANCY is a life-changing journey, not just for the mother but also for the tiny human growing inside her.

It's a time when the body goes through incredible physical and hormonal transformations to support the baby's development and to prepare for breastfeeding.

Yet, what many mothers may not realise is how much their diet directly impacts their baby's health – not just during pregnancy but far into the future.

With Pregnancy Awareness Week, which runs from today until Friday, shining a spotlight on maternal health, it's the perfect time to explore how proper nutrition during pregnancy can lead to healthier outcomes for both mother and child.

## Why nutrition matters during pregnancy

What moms-to-be eat is not just about satisfying cravings or staying full; it's about providing the essential nutrients that fuel the baby's growth and development.

According to Dr Themba Hadebe, a medical expert from the Bonitas Medical Fund, proper nutrition is critical for avoiding complications during pregnancy and ensuring healthy foetal development.

“Getting the right nutrients isn't just about avoiding complications—it's about building a strong foundation for your baby's future,” says Hadebe.

The foods you consume directly affect your baby's brain development bone growth and even their heart health.

For South African women, where urbanisation and fast-food culture have shifted eating habits, it's vital to make informed choices about what goes on the plate.

## The risks of nutrient deficiencies

Pregnancy is a time when the body's nutrient needs increase significantly. Without proper nutrition, both mother and baby are at risk of serious health complications.

The most common nutrient deficiencies during pregnancy and their effects:

### Iron deficiency

Iron is crucial for producing the extra blood needed to support the baby. A lack of iron can lead to:

- Fatigue in the mother.
- Increased risk of pre-term birth.
- Low birth weight for the baby.

Iron-rich foods like spinach, lentils and red meat can help prevent this.

### Calcium deficiency

When there isn't enough calcium in the mother's diet, the baby will draw calcium from the mother's bones, increasing her risk of osteoporosis later in life.

For the baby, this could mean impaired skeletal development. Dairy products, leafy greens and fortified

plant-based milks are excellent sources.

### Iodine deficiency

Iodine is essential for brain development. A deficiency can lead to cognitive impairments in children, affecting their ability to learn and process information later in life.

South Africa has made strides in combating iodine deficiency through iodised salt but pregnant women may still need to be mindful.

#### Vitamin B12 deficiency

Vitamin B12 plays a critical role in the development of the baby's brain and nervous system. Low levels of B12 increase the risk of:

- Neural tube defects. - Developmental delays. - Including animal products like eggs, dairy, and lean meats in your diet or consulting your doctor about supplements if you follow a plant-based lifestyle.

#### Vitamin D deficiency

Vitamin D is vital for bone health and a strong immune system. A deficiency during pregnancy has been associated with pre-eclampsia, a potentially life-threatening condition for both mother and baby.

Sunlight exposure, oily fish, and fortified foods are good sources of vitamin D.

#### Vitamin C deficiency

Lack of vitamin C can impact the baby's brain development, particularly the hippocampus, which is responsible for memory. Research shows that even a slight deficiency can reduce hippocampus size by 10–15%, potentially affecting cognitive abilities later in life.

To address these risks, doctors often recommend prenatal supplements. However, Hadebe cautions against over-relying on them.

“It's important not to exceed the recommended dosages.

“Always consult your doctor before starting any supplements to ensure they're tailored to your specific needs,” he advises.

Supplements can't replace a balanced diet. They are intended to fill gaps, not serve as a primary source of nutrition.

Nutrition is just one part of a healthy pregnancy. Regular exercise can help manage weight, reduce stress and improve mental health by releasing endorphins.

Activities like walking, swimming or prenatal yoga are gentle yet effective ways to stay active.

What you eat during pregnancy doesn't just shape your baby's present — it lays the groundwork for their future.

Research shows that a mother's nutritional status during pregnancy can affect the baby's cognitive development, heart health and risk of obesity later in life.

Pregnancy is a time of transformation, not just for your body but also your mindset.

It's an opportunity to prioritise your health in a way that benefits you and your baby for years to come.