- Pregnancy

The healthy way to eat for two

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YOU don't have to be a rocket scientist to understand healthy eating is important for mothersto-be and their unborn babies.



The British Nutrition Foundation (BNF) has just published Diet in Pregnancy, a 'roadmap for good nutrition for parents and their babies' which outlines the latest pregnancy nutrition academic research and recommendations. The paper highlights the key nutrients to set women up for a healthy pregnancy.

However a significant number of women don't get all of the nutrients they need in pregnancy, says Sara Stanner, science director at the BNF.

Here, she shares some dos and don'ts of pre-conception and pregnancy nutrition...

1. DO EAT VITAMIN C-RICH FOODS TO BOOST IRON

Pairing plant sources of iron like lentils, beans, or spinach with foods high in vitamin C, such as bell peppers, tomatoes or citrus fruits, can boost iron absorption, says

Sara, who explains: "Many people are surprised to learn that iron from plant-based sources isn't as easily absorbed by the body as that from meat. Pairing vitamin C-rich foods with iron-rich foods is particularly important in pregnancy, when iron is needed to support the growing baby and placenta."

Consistently making this pairing a part of your daily meals could help reduce the risk of irondeficiency anaemia.

2. DO EAT PORTIONS OF FISH THE SIZE OF YOUR WHOLE HAND

Two weekly servings of oily fish like salmon and sardines are an excellent source of DHA, an omega-3 fat that plays a vital role in the development of babies' brains and eyes, especially in the third trimester, Sara explains.

She says a cooked portion should be about the size of your whole hand (roughly 140g), and if you don't eat fish, a daily supplement suitable for pregnancy providing 450mg of DHA from 20 weeks onwards is a good alternative.

3. DO PRIORITISE IODINE-RICH FOODS

Sara says iodine is essential for babies' brain development, and she stresses: "Ensure you build up good iodine stores pre-conception to support a healthy pregnancy."

White fish and dairy products are the main sources of iodine, and women on a plant-based diet should choose fortified dairy alternatives. If you're avoiding dairy foods and fish, Sara suggests considering an iodine supplement.

4. DO GET ENOUGH CALCIUM

Calcium plays a vital role in building babies' bones and teeth, all while protecting the mother's bone health during pregnancy. Dairy foods like milk, cheese and yoghurt are key sources, and the BNF recommends aiming for two to three portions a day.

If you avoid dairy, choose plant milks and yoghurts, advises Sara: "Foods like tofu, green leafy vegetables and almonds can contribute to calcium intake."

5. DO DRINK MORE FLUIDS

Staying well hydrated during pregnancy is essential, says Sara. Aim for at least eight glasses a day – water is best, but milk and small amounts of 100% fruit juice can also contribute.

6. DON'T TAKE COD LIVER OIL

Although cod liver oil sounds like a healthy choice, during pregnancy it's best avoided, warns Sara. She explains that cod liver oil contains high levels of vitamin A in the form of retinol, and too much of this form of vitamin A can be harmful to a developing baby, particularly in the early stages.

7. DON'T EXCEED 200mg OF CAFFEINE

Caffeine is found not just coffee and tea but also chocolate, energy drinks and some cold and flu remedies. However, during pregnancy high intakes of caffeine have been linked to increased risk of miscarriage and low birth weight, warns Sara.

"It's recommended to keep your intake below 200mg a day, which is around two mugs of instant coffee or three to four mugs of tea," she says.

8. DON'T EAT SMOKED OR CURED FISH

Some types of fish, such as cold smoked salmon or cured fish, can carry listeria, which is a bacteria that can be harmful. Avoid these foods unless they've been cooked until steaming hot. Tuna should be limited to no more than four cans a week, due to high levels of mercury.

9. DON'T START A WEIGHT-LOSS DIET

Sara stresses pregnancy is not the time to aim for weight loss: "Your body needs additional energy and nutrients to support your health alongside your baby's growth and development. Focus on nourishment, not numbers on a scale."