

# Eating well

Creating a baby is an exciting business. Doing it right can pay dividends in both a healthy pregnancy and a healthy baby. By **Carolyn Moody**.

## Preconceptual care

In an ideal world we would start with preconceptual care. In other words, start to balance health and nutrition at least six months before setting out to get pregnant. The first few weeks of pregnancy are vital ones for a baby's development and there is plenty of research to indicate that the parents' state of health at the time of conception influences a child's future development.

This preconceptual approach ensures that both prospective parents are as healthy as possible, well nourished, with no vitamin or mineral deficiencies before conception. It also deals with allergies and other chronic health problems and helps to reduce the possibility of passing them on to potential offspring.

When planning a baby, both partners should give up any bad habits such as alcohol and smoking. The contraceptive pill or use of a hormone-impregnated IUD (intra-uterine device) lowers the body's level of zinc, manganese, selenium and Vitamin A and raises copper levels. Women who have used either method of contraception

should stop three months before getting pregnant and should increase their levels of these nutrients.

Preconceptual nutrition and health advice can also help couples where fertility is a problem, particularly where there has been a history of miscarriage, premature birth and birth defects, or for couples who are undergoing IVF (in vitro fertilisation) treatment.

## During pregnancy

Some women still believe that it is normal to put on a lot of weight during pregnancy so they can indulge in cream cakes, lots of chocolate and other sugary items. These foods may be alright on an occasional basis, but they are not designed to create a super healthy baby. They will also cause metabolic disturbances in the mother, plus a weight gain that will be difficult to shift once the baby arrives.

Many women go through pregnancy not putting on any more weight than that required by the developing baby. It is easy to do if you pay attention to what you eat.

- **Stop consuming all alcohol, coffee, black tea, sugar and sugary foods, and cola drinks:** these are known as blood sugar disruptors. They cause peaks in blood sugar and stimulate insulin production to bring down excess blood sugar. They may contribute to pregnancy diabetes in susceptible people. Alcohol and caffeine (contained in chocolate, cola drinks, coffee and tea) are known to cross the placenta directly into the baby's blood. Consumption of blood sugar disruptors leads to deficiencies of zinc, magnesium, B vitamins, vitamin C, chromium,

# for two



manganese and selenium. Lack of zinc has been well documented in women who miscarry or have premature babies – it is a mineral vital for fertility and a healthy pregnancy.

- **Wherever possible, choose whole, unrefined, natural foods, free from processing and refining:** ideally, you should be eating 40% of your diet as protein from fish, meat, eggs, nuts, seeds, cheese, yoghurt, pulses (beans and lentils) and tofu. Around 50% of your diet should be based on the slow-releasing carbohydrates from fresh and dried fruit, vegetables, nuts, seeds and pulses (yes, the last three foods come under both categories). The remaining 10% can come from whole grains and other starchy carbohydrates such as potatoes, sweet potatoes and other root vegetables. There is no room in a healthy pregnancy diet for white, refined flour products which are devoid of nutrients and full of chemical bleachers and preservatives. Green leafy vegetables are important for folic acid and should be eaten twice a day, with lunch and your evening meal. Folic acid plays a well-known role in the

prevention of spina bifida. No doubt your doctor will recommend a good multivitamin and mineral supplement with extra folic acid.

You can add nuts, seeds and yoghurt to breakfast cereals to increase protein content. Eat salads and soups at lunchtime with added protein in the form of fish, meat or eggs.

Snacks can be important to avoid drops in blood sugar levels. Rather than bars of chocolate, biscuits and cakes, eat small snacks of fresh and dried fruit, seeds and nuts, a hard-boiled egg or piece of cold, cooked chicken. This will sustain normal blood sugar and energy levels.

- **Ask your doctor to check your blood for vitamin D:** vitamin D is vital for the absorption of calcium, which you will need in greater quantities for your developing baby. If your levels register below 32 mcg/ml, you can buy *D-Cure* from pharmacies to bring levels up to normal. Better still, ask your doctor to prescribe it. Magnesium is also important for the absorption of calcium and has been shown to be effective in treating women who suffer from pre-eclampsia (a

condition characterised by high blood pressure during pregnancy) and eclampsia (life-threatening seizures). You can safely take up to 600 mg of magnesium daily as citrate (try *Solgar* which is available in some health food shops).

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- **Omega-3 fatty acids as ‘brain food’:** make sure you eat oily fish or take a supplement for the omega-3 fatty acids, the most recently researched nutrient needed for the development of your child's brain and central nervous system. The presence of omega-3 fatty acids is also particularly high in walnuts and linseeds, as well as most other nuts and seeds and the oils made from them.
- **Rest as much as you can:** when I was pregnant I received the following advice: “Don't stand if you can sit, and don't sit if you can lie down”. It worked! When you do sit, use a footstool or some other support wherever possible to aid circulation in the legs. Make sure you get a good eight hours sleep each night, especially if you are working and have other children to take care of. Create as much ‘me time’ as you can possibly squeeze into your day. Having time to chill out and just enjoy your pregnancy is as vital as ensuring a good diet and taking the right supplements.

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