

PREGNANCY DIET

Protein in your pregnancy diet

Reviewed by the BabyCenter Medical Advisory Board
Last updated: December 2009

The amino acids that make up protein are the building blocks of your body's cells – and of your baby's body as well. It's important to get enough protein throughout your pregnancy, but especially during the second and third trimesters, when your baby is growing the fastest and your breasts and organs are getting bigger to accommodate the needs of your growing baby.

How much protein you need

Pregnant women: about 70 grams (g) of protein per day

Non-pregnant women: about 45 g

You don't have to get the recommended amount of protein every day. Instead, aim for that amount as an average over the course of a few days or a week.

Most women in the United States regularly eat more protein in a day than they need, so you probably won't have any trouble meeting your body's needs during pregnancy. If you don't eat meat, you can meet your protein requirements through other sources, including dairy, beans, or soy products.

Food sources of protein

Beans are a great source of protein, as are lean meat, poultry, fish and shellfish, eggs, milk, cheese, tofu, and yogurt. While animal products contain complete proteins (all nine amino acid components) and other plant sources generally don't, eating a variety of foods throughout the course of the day will help ensure that you get all of the amino acids you need.

Eat three or four servings of protein daily and you'll be well on your way to eating right for a healthy pregnancy and baby. (Your prenatal daily requirement of 70 grams is the equivalent of two glasses of milk, a 5-ounce chicken breast, and two cups of yogurt, for example.)

Here are some good protein sources:

Dairy

- 1/2 cup 1% cottage cheese: 14 g
- 1/2 cup part-skim ricotta cheese: 14 g
- 8 ounce container low-fat yogurt: 9 to 12 g
- 1 ounce Parmesan cheese: 11 g
- 1 ounce Swiss cheese: 8 g
- 1 cup skim milk: 8 g
- 1 ounce part-skim mozzarella cheese: 7 g
- 1 ounce cheddar cheese: 7 g
- 1 large fresh egg: 6 g

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Beans, nuts, legumes

- 1/2 cup raw tofu (firm): 20 g
- 1 cup cooked lentils: 18 g
- 1 cup canned black beans: 15 g
- 1 cup canned kidney beans: 13 g
- 1 cup canned garbanzos: 12 g
- 1 cup canned pinto beans: 12 g
- 2 tablespoons smooth peanut butter: 8 g
- 1 ounce dry roasted peanuts: 7 g
- 1 cup light plain soymilk: 6 g

Meat, poultry and fish

Note that 3 ounces of meat or fish is about the size of a pack of cards.

- 1/2 roasted chicken breast (no skin): 27 g
- 3 ounces sockeye salmon: 23 g
- 3 ounces trout: 23 g
- 3 ounce lean beef hamburger patty, broiled: 21g

Caution: Not all fish are considered safe during pregnancy. Some predator fish, such as shark, swordfish, king mackerel, and tilefish should be avoided because they contain methyl mercury, a metal believed to be harmful in high doses to the growing brains of fetuses and young children. In addition, the FDA recommends that you limit your total consumption of other fish to about 12 ounces per week during pregnancy. Learn more about [how to avoid mercury while eating fish](#).

The signs of a protein deficiency

Weight loss, muscle fatigue, frequent infections, and severe fluid retention can be signs that you're not getting enough protein in your diet.

Grains in your pregnancy diet

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Why grains are so important

Grains (whole wheat, oats, barley, corn, and rice, to name a few) are packed with nutrients like [iron](#), selenium, and [magnesium](#). They're also especially good sources of the B vitamins (including B1, B2, [folic acid](#), and niacin) your growing baby needs for just about every part of the body. These foods supply energy for your baby's development and help build the placenta.

Most grains have plenty of fiber, too. The recommended amount of fiber during pregnancy is 28 grams a day, which helps prevent [constipation](#) and [hemorrhoids](#). Be sure to look for "whole grains" – whole wheat bread, for example, or brown rice – as these contain the most fiber, vitamins, and nutrients. Products labeled "*refined*" or "*enriched*" aren't as beneficial to you or your baby.

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A note on shopping for whole grains: Many products now carry a label on the front of the package stating "contains X grams whole grains." There's also a whole grain stamp.

To say "whole grain," the product must have a minimum of 8 grams of whole grain. To say "100% whole grains," the product must contain at least 16 grams of whole grain per serving (16 grams is considered one whole grain serving).

If the product doesn't have a whole grain label, look for the whole grain content on the nutrient label. Your goal should be to eat 48 grams of whole grains (three servings) daily.

Some good grain choices

Here are some good options for grains. Each is equal to one serving (16 grams) of grain.

- 1/2 cup cooked wheat, oatmeal, or barley cereal
- 1 cup ready-to-eat whole grain cereal
- 1.25-inch-square piece of cornbread
- 1/2 whole wheat bagel
- 1/2 raisin or plain bagel
- 1 slice of whole wheat, French, or sourdough bread
- 1/2 whole grain hamburger or hot dog bun
- 1/2 whole grain English muffin
- 1/2 whole wheat pita pocket (6 inches across)
- 1/2 cup cooked brown rice or wild rice
- 1/2 cup cooked grain, such as quinoa, amaranth, millet, bulgur, or barley
- 2 rice cakes
- 1/2 cup cooked whole wheat noodles or pasta
- 1 corn or whole wheat tortilla (6 inches across)
- 1 whole grain waffle or pancake (4 1/2 inches across)
- 3 cups popcorn
- 1/2 cup buckwheat, teff, triticale (a hybrid of wheat and rye), spelt, kamut, sorghum, or rye flour

Easy ways to add more grains to your daily diet

- Try a variety of grains for your morning cereal. Millet, oatmeal, and wheat all make good hot breakfasts.
- Substitute air-popped popcorn or whole grain crackers for chips.
- Experiment with whole grain noodles and pastas. Japanese soba noodles, for example, are made from buckwheat.
- Add cooked barley or quinoa or other whole grains to quick breads, pancake or waffle batter, and soups, or make them into patties.
- Use leftover whole grains to make side salads. Simply add chopped veggies and a vinaigrette dressing
- Replace some of the flour in your baked goods with whole grain flour, such as whole wheat, teff, triticale, spelt, or rye.

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Dietary fats in your pregnancy diet

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The value of fats in your pregnancy diet

Fats are an essential part of a healthy diet, but some fats are better for your health than others. Your goal (whether you're pregnant or not) should be to make sure you get adequate "good" fats in your diet while minimizing the "bad" fats.

Some fats (and the fatty acids they contain) are particularly important during pregnancy because they support your baby's brain and eye development – both before and after birth. Fats also help the placenta and other tissues grow, and studies show that some fats may help prevent preterm birth and low birth weight.

Which fats to eat during pregnancy

Four types of fat are found in food: monounsaturated, polyunsaturated, saturated, and hydrogenated. A fat is made up of a combination of fatty acids, so fats don't typically fall into just one of these categories. Palm oil and lard, for example, both contain about 50 percent monounsaturated and 50 percent saturated fat. But for the most part, you can follow these guidelines for which fats to avoid and which to eat in moderation:

Monounsaturated fats are found in safflower, olive, canola, and peanut oils, as well as in olives, avocado, nuts, and nut butters. They're considered "good" fats because they're best at lowering cholesterol.

Polyunsaturated fats are beneficial, too. They contain the omega-3 fatty acids (like DHA and ALA, both of which are crucial for the healthy development of your baby) and omega-6 fatty acids. Omega-3s are found in some cold water fish, flax seed oil, and canola oil, and omega-6s are found in sunflower, cottonseed, corn, and soybean oils. (Soybean oil, found in many salad dressings and processed foods, also contains some omega-3s.)

Although fish can be an excellent source of omega-3 fatty acids, some types of fish contain contaminants such as mercury. Learn which fish are safest to eat during pregnancy.

Many monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats contain vitamin E, an important antioxidant often missing in the typical American diet.

Saturated fats fall into the "bad" camp – eat as little as possible of these. Saturated fats are found in high-fat meats, whole milk, tropical oils (such as palm kernel and coconut), butter, and lard.

Hydrogenated and partially hydrogenated fats (also known as trans fats) are to be avoided. These fats are found in fried foods and some kinds of margarine. They're also used in some packaged foods – like crackers, cookies, and chips – to extend the shelf life of these products. Read the Nutrition Facts label to find the amount of saturated and trans fat in a product.

A diet high in saturated fat or trans fat can raise your cholesterol and may put you at risk for heart disease. Studies show that saturated and hydrogenated fats may be linked to other health problems, too, such as cancer and diabetes. There's even some evidence linking trans fats to lower birth weights and a higher risk of having a small for gestational age (SGA) baby.

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Don't beat yourself up if you indulge in a bag of chips or a plate of fried chicken on occasion. Just make it the exception rather than the rule, aiming for healthy fats as much as possible.

How much fat to eat during pregnancy

No more than 35 percent of your daily calories should come from fat. To figure this out: Multiply the number of calories you eat in a day by .35, then divide that number by nine, the number of calories per gram of fat. This is your upper limit for the number of grams of fat you should eat in a day.

Another helpful guideline is to aim for about 6 to 8 teaspoons (30 to 40 grams) of added oils per day, using the list below as a guide to the healthiest choices. (The rest of the fat in your diet is already in the food you eat.)

There's probably no need to increase your consumption of fat during pregnancy – just find the right balance. And keep in mind that no matter what kind of fat you eat, there are nine calories in every gram.

Good fat choices during pregnancy

Monounsaturated fats: Good choice

Each of the following contains 5 grams of fat and 45 calories:

- 2 tablespoons (1 ounce) avocado
- 1 teaspoon safflower, olive, canola, or peanut oil
- 6 almonds or cashews
- 10 peanuts
- 4 pecan halves
- 1 1/2 teaspoon nut butters (trans fat free): almond, peanut, cashew
- 1 tablespoon sesame seeds
- 2 Brazil nuts
- 5 hazelnuts (filberts)
- 3 macadamia nuts
- 8 large black olives
- 10 large green olives with pimento
- 16 pistachios

Polyunsaturated fats: Another good choice

Each of the following contains 5 grams of fat and 45 calories:

- 1 teaspoon margarine, trans fat free
- 1 teaspoon regular mayonnaise
- 1 tablespoon reduced-fat mayonnaise
- 2 teaspoons sunflower seed butter
- 4 walnut halves (omega-3)
- 1 tablespoon flax seed (omega-3)
- 1 teaspoon flax oil (omega-3)
- 1 teaspoon sunflower, corn oil, or soybean oil (omega-6)
- 1 tablespoon regular salad dressing
- 2 tablespoons reduced-fat salad dressing

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- 1 tablespoon pumpkin seeds (omega-3), sesame seeds, or sunflower seeds
- 1 tablespoon pine nuts
- 2 teaspoons tahini
- 1.5 ounces farmed Atlantic salmon, cooked (omega-3)
- 1 ounce Pacific herring, cooked (omega-3)
- 2 ounces trout, cooked (omega-3)
- 2.25 ounces sardines, canned in water (omega-3)

Many foods are now fortified with omega-3s. Check the labels on eggs, milk, soy beverages, orange juice, yogurt, bread, cereal, and margarine.

Fats to avoid during pregnancy

Saturated fats: Avoid

Though the portions below equal one serving of fat, they are the ones to avoid:

- 1 slice bacon (regular or turkey)
- 1 teaspoon butter
- 2 tablespoons shredded coconut
- 1 tablespoon regular cream cheese
- 1 1/2 tablespoons reduced-fat cream cheese
- 1 tablespoon heavy cream
- 1 teaspoon shortening or lard
- 2 tablespoons regular sour cream
- 3 tablespoons reduced-fat sour cream
- 1 teaspoon coconut, palm, or palm kernel oil

Hydrogenated/trans fats: Avoid

- Fried foods such as French fries, donuts, and churros
- Shortening
- Margarine that has the word "hydrogenated" on the label
- Peanut butter made with hydrogenated oil
- Cookies, cakes, crackers, pies, turnovers, and candy made with hydrogenated vegetable oils

Easy ways to reduce harmful fats in your pregnancy diet

- Switch oils. If you've been cooking or baking with hydrogenated fats like stick margarine or shortening, substitute canola or safflower oil (they have the highest smoke point). Olive oil and flax seed oil are great for salad dressings.
- Replace some of the meat in your diet. Try toasted nuts instead of bacon bits on your salad, and eat fish instead of meat a couple of times a week.
- When you do eat meat, choose leaner cuts and avoid those with marbling. Because leaner cuts of meat are sometimes not as moist, use marinades and slow cooking methods to enhance their texture.
- Skim the solid fats off the top of soups and stews before serving.

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- Cut your cheese consumption. Don't order that "double cheese" pizza, and put half as much cheese on a homemade casserole, for example. (You can usually use less if you choose a stronger flavored cheese – sharp cheddar instead of mild, for example.) Use mashed avocado on your burger in place of cheese.
- When eating at a fast food restaurant, avoid fried food and choose a smaller grilled burger or grilled chicken sandwich. Choose a fruit salad or side salad in place of the fries – and don't forget to ask for light dressing.
- Replace fat-laden snacks with healthier options like ~~fruits and vegetables~~ and whole grains.
- Replace full-fat dairy products with low-fat or nonfat versions.
- Remove skin from poultry before cooking.
Keep an eye out for hidden fats on restaurant menus. Tip-off words: pan-fried, crispy, creamy, creamed, fried, au gratin, hollandaise, escaloped, and buttery. Ask for grilled, baked, or steamed fish, meat, and vegetables instead.