



Vitamin supplements and you

For pregnant or breastfeeding women,
and babies and young children



About this leaflet

Vitamins are really important – they are essential nutrients that your body needs, in small amounts, in order to work properly.

You may have read or heard lots of information about what vitamins you need when you are pregnant or breastfeeding, or what you should be giving your baby or young child.

This leaflet explains the recommendations for vitamin supplements for:

- women who are planning to get pregnant
- pregnant women
- breastfeeding women
- babies and young children.



Why are vitamins important?

Vitamins are essential nutrients that your body needs in small amounts to stay healthy and well.

Most people should be able to get all the nutrients they need by eating a varied and balanced diet, including a variety of at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day.

However, sometimes people may not be getting all they need – for example, women who are pregnant, planning to get pregnant or breastfeeding, and babies and young children. In these cases, you might need to supplement certain vitamins to make sure you are getting enough.

Planning a pregnancy, and pregnant or breastfeeding women

If you are planning a pregnancy or if you are pregnant or breastfeeding, there are certain vitamins you should take. These will help to make sure that your body is getting everything it needs during pregnancy and breastfeeding, and will help your baby develop healthily.

Folic acid

Who for?

All pregnant women and women planning a pregnancy.

What does it do?

Taking folic acid before you are pregnant and until the 12th week of your pregnancy reduces the chance of your baby being born with a neural tube defect such as spina bifida. This is a birth defect where the spine does not form properly.

You should start to take folic acid when you are planning to become pregnant. However, if you did not take folic acid before you conceived, you

should start taking it as soon as you know you are pregnant, and should continue to do so until your 12th week of pregnancy.

Folate is the natural form of folic acid, found in food. It can be difficult to get enough folate from food alone, so taking the recommended amount of folic acid is very important. You should try to eat plenty of foods that contain folate (see the examples on page 8) as well as taking the recommended amount of folic acid as a supplement.

How much do you need?

We recommend that all women who are planning to get pregnant and those who are already pregnant take 400 micrograms of folic acid each day up until their 12th week of pregnancy.

If you have already had a pregnancy that was affected by a neural tube defect, a higher dose is recommended and you should speak to your GP or a health professional for more advice.

Vitamin D

Who for?

All pregnant and breastfeeding women.

What does it do?

Vitamin D regulates the amount of calcium in the body, which helps to keep bones and teeth strong and healthy. It is important that you get enough vitamin D while you are pregnant to keep your bones healthy and to provide your baby with enough vitamin D to support them in their first few months. Because your baby will get vitamin D from breastmilk, it is important that you take a vitamin D supplement during pregnancy and while you are breastfeeding.

There are only a few food sources of vitamin D (see the examples on page 8). The best source of vitamin D is summer sunlight, so during the winter months it can be particularly difficult to get enough.

The amount of time you need in the sun to make enough vitamin D is different for every person and depends on things like skin type, time of day and time of the year. But you don't need to sunbathe: no matter what your skin type, the amount of sun you need is less than the amount that causes tanning or burning.

All pregnant and breastfeeding women, particularly teenagers and young women, are at risk of vitamin D deficiency. You are more at risk if:

- you have limited skin exposure to sunlight, or cover your skin for cultural reasons
- you are from South Asian, African-Caribbean or Middle Eastern descent, or have darker skin, because your body does not produce as much vitamin D in response to sunlight.

Therefore, all pregnant and breastfeeding women are advised to take a daily vitamin D supplement.



How much do you need?

We recommend that all pregnant and breastfeeding women take a daily vitamin D supplement of 10 micrograms.

If you are in any doubt about taking vitamin supplements during your pregnancy or while you are breastfeeding, speak to your GP or a health professional.

Warning: If you are pregnant, you should avoid supplements containing vitamin A (retinol) – this will include some multivitamins – as too much of it can harm your baby's development. You should also avoid liver and liver products (including fish liver oil), as they are high in vitamin A.



Babies and young children

It is important that all babies and young children get enough vitamins to keep them healthy and to help their growing bodies develop.

Your health professional or GP may advise you to give your child vitamin drops containing vitamins A, C and D between the ages of six months and five years, unless they are drinking 500ml (a pint) or more of infant formula a day during this time.

All children under five years old are at risk of vitamin D deficiency. They are more at risk if:

- they have limited skin exposure to sunlight
- they are from South Asian, African-Caribbean or Middle Eastern descent, or have darker skin, because their bodies do not produce as much vitamin D in response to sunlight.



Vitamin D

Vitamin D regulates the amount of calcium in the body, which keeps bones and teeth strong and healthy. It is particularly important that all babies and young children get enough vitamin D, as those who don't could become deficient. This could cause their bones to soften and can lead to rickets.

The best source of vitamin D is summer sunlight, so it can be difficult for children to get enough during the winter months.

We recommend that all babies and children aged between six months and five years take a daily supplement of vitamin D, unless they are drinking 500ml (a pint) or more of infant formula a day.

If you have not taken a vitamin D supplement during pregnancy, and if you are exclusively or predominantly breastfeeding, your health professional may advise you to start giving your baby vitamin D from one month and continuing until they are five.

Vitamin A

Vitamin A is an important vitamin for babies and young children, and they may not be getting enough. It helps strengthen their immune system, can help their vision in dim light, and supports healthy skin.



Vitamin C

As well as being important for your child's general health and their immune system, vitamin C can also help their body to absorb iron.

Remember, you should also try to get your vitamins from good food sources:

Folate: Brussels sprouts, spinach, spring greens, broccoli, green beans, oranges and yeast extract.

Vitamin A: cheese, eggs, oily fish* (such as mackerel), milk, carrots, dark green leafy vegetables, fortified margarine and yoghurt.

Vitamin C: oranges, kiwi fruit, strawberries, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, sweet potatoes and peppers.



Vitamin D: oily fish,* eggs, fortified margarine and breakfast cereals. But remember, the best source of vitamin D is sunlight.

* although you should not have more than two portions a week if you are pregnant or breastfeeding

Where can you get vitamin supplements?

You can get vitamin supplements from the following places:

- your GP (pregnant women, mothers of children under one year, babies and children qualify for free prescriptions)
- pharmacists, who can offer advice on products available for sale over the counter
- Healthy Start – if you receive Healthy Start vouchers, these will include coupons for Healthy Start vitamin tablets that are suitable for pregnant or breastfeeding women, and

Healthy Start vitamin drops for children aged between six months and four years. Ask your midwife or health visitor where you can collect these locally. Some primary care trusts sell Healthy Start vitamins or may provide them free to women and children who do not receive vouchers. Ask your midwife or health visitor for more information.



More information about vitamins and supplements

For more information on vitamins, visit:

- the Food Standards Agency at www.eatwell.gov.uk
- the Healthy Start website at www.healthystart.nhs.uk

Alternatively you can refer to *The Pregnancy Book* and *Birth to Five*, which midwives give to all pregnant women and new mothers, or talk to your midwife, health visitor, GP or pharmacist.



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