

Nutrition in Pregnancy: Let's Keep it Simple

Dinah's 5 Pregnancy Eating Principals:

1. Quality
2. Quantity
3. Frequency
4. Variety
5. Protein

Those fit quite nicely onto the fingers of one hand, so they are easy to remember.

1. Quality: The pinkie:
In a nutshell (nuts are great):
Fresh, unprocessed food = quality.
Avoid as much packaged and manufactured food as you can.
Even better, avoid dairy and meat with hormones and antibiotics and eat organic. I know that's expensive so it may be just something to aspire to. Maybe now is the time to start a garden: organic tomatoes – easy and fun to grow and yummy.
2. Quantity: The ring finger:
I'm not that into portions or grams or calories on the whole: It's not reasonable or necessary to get into that much detail. But, obviously, a pregnant woman needs to eat enough. The media are telling you rightly that Americans eat too much as it is. That is true but in my experience, the American Nation's eating disorder takes many forms, and a significant number of pregnant women do not eat enough. Enough means average (not restaurant) portion sizes for 3 meals per day plus a couple of small snacks (a few bites/a mini-portion.)
3. Frequency: The middle finger:
As you know, your baby's food comes via the nutrients in your blood which alter throughout the day. When you have not eaten for a long time, your blood sugar will be low, and other nutrients may also be low. Your baby is receiving less nutrient-rich blood and also you are likely to feel weaker and more drained than you would if you were not pregnant and had not eaten in a while. The only solution is frequency. Meal skipping is out. No breakfast is out. Snacks are in. Babies naturally graze at the breast. They are used to eating even more constantly inside. You must be a grazer too.
4. Variety: The index finger:
This is my version of the food pyramid. Just make sure that you have plenty of many different types of quality food. The essential elements are proteins, carbohydrates, fats, fruits, and vegetables. (See section 5 for details on protein rich foods.)
The carbohydrate category is the major energy source and can't be skipped during pregnancy. Most of us get plenty of it from breads, pasta, rice, corn, potatoes, etc. The pyramid has the odd category of fats and sweets (not a category), as well as a dairy category. Ah, yes dairy, let's talk about dairy.
Dairy is a very strange but useful food. The government's pyramid gives dairy its own category. This makes it seem that it is an essential element of a complete diet which I am sure the producers of dairy food think that it is. (Anybody would think that without milk we would not get enough calcium... There are other sources, such as broccoli, almonds, leafy veggies, sardines.) Human milk for humans is miraculous. Cows' milk

for humans can be very nutritious but may be allergenic and mucus-making. I am not excited to hear that my clients have been drinking a gallon of milk a week. Some is fine, but moderation... Cottage cheese is a great protein source (30 grams in 1 cup!) if you find it difficult to get enough protein. And what about those hormones and antibiotics? Ask yourself if you can afford organic dairy. Another issue with dairy is the listeria story... Listeria is a food borne bacteria not killed by refrigerator temperatures. Mostly the issue is soft cheeses such as brie or camembert, which could be made from unpasteurized milk. As almost all of the products in American stores (even at Whole Foods) are pasteurized, I don't think this is much of an issue. (However listeria sometimes likes smoked and cured things eg lox, processed meat, meat spreads, so you should either avoid those or eat them very hot. They don't tend to be great quality food sources anyway.)

The fruits and vegetables are low in many American diets, so watch that one. If you are not used to eating a lot of vegetables, start with fruit and a few veggies that you know you like. Always have a fruit bowl on the table so that as you walk past you pick up a piece of fruit. Not wanting the fruit to go off is a great incentive to eating it. Be imaginative with veggies. Try adding avocado and sprouts as well as lettuce and tomato to your sandwiches.

Oils are essential of course. If you are preparing your own food, you'll find that trans fats are not an issue, and using butter and olive oil are pluses not minuses in my mind. (As for the margarine, throw it in the trash) Animal products are of course cholesterol sources, but during pregnancy, I would not be over-concerned with that issue as animals are such a useful protein source.

5. Protein: The thumb:

Protein makes cells... No doubt about its vital importance for a healthy diet for all and particularly for pregnancy. Many (you should probably have heard of Dr. Tom Brewer) believe that very large amounts of protein should be recommended to prevent preeclampsia and to maintain a healthy pregnancy. Bradley childbirth preparation classes teach that 80-90 grams of protein per day is required. That is a lot of protein. My rather non-scientific attitude to this is: If it's really hard to eat that much protein, it must be too much. I believe that 50-60 grams per day is a great amount.

High-protein foods are meat, chicken, fish, eggs, soy, beans, nuts and dairy. There is also protein in smaller amounts in other foods such as whole grains, potato skins, brown rice, etc. So you can certainly get enough protein if you are a vegetarian or even a vegan, but it might take more effort.

Meat is a great source of protein, but I am very aware these days that factory produced meat is usually laced with antibiotics, and the animals may be kept in very inhumane environments and slaughtered in ways we would rather not hear about. Wouldn't it be great if we could just go out and hunt for our supper? In the meantime we might just buy judiciously.

Fish: Fish is a wonderful food for omnivorous humans: great protein source, essential essential fatty acids, a good thing. But sadly they can be polluted with mercury and PBDEs. (There are also environmental concerns with respect to both over-fishing and fish farming.) The Food and Drug Administration has decided that due to mercury contamination which can affect the sensitive unborn brain, pregnant women should eat no more than one serving of fish per week. Dinah's thoughts on this: If the FDA recommends that, we must really be in trouble. Maybe once a week is too much? (Incidentally, isn't it a bit backwards to recommend avoidance of fish rather than

solving the problem? Maybe a little lobbying for getting mercury out of smokestacks would help our children to confidently enjoy fish when they become pregnant?) Also, the FDA has not yet addressed PBDEs which are known carcinogens and reside in the fatty tissue of fish. So, a low mercury fish, such as salmon, has a lot of fat and therefore lots of PDBEs. Oh dear, but it's such a good food. What to do? Well I would say, continue to eat occasional fish and eat a different kind of fush each time: an occasional piece of tune alternating with an occasional piece of salmon or catfish, say. Soy is a great option. Vegetarians often rely on a lot of soy for sufficient protein. Fine, but moderation again. Many soy products are very much processed foods. Also soy could theoretically be estrogenic which in large quantities might (theoretically) be a problem for a boy baby.

If you eat two high protein meals a day plus an additional meal with some/a little protein and maybe a protein snack or two you're fine. That would be a single egg for breakfast, a chicken salad at lunch time and a meat casserole for dinner (two high protein meals and one lesser.) Or, alternatively, a smoothie with yogurt and protein powder for breakfast, a snack with cheese: fish, veggies, baked potato for lunch; nuts as a snack and maybe a pasta with marinara and veggies and a little Parmesan for dinner; (breakfast and lunch higher protein, some protein snacks and not much protein at dinner.)

And a note on supplements:

Always remember that your diet is much more important than any supplements. You cannot eat poorly but take a prenatal vitamin every day and think you're OK. If you are eating well but not taking any supplements at all, that is certainly more important. We are told that it is very hard to obtain sufficient folic acid (a B vitamin) in the diet and that it is an important nutrient for the prevention of neural tube defects (spina bifida). So, taking the recommended 800mcg minimum (or 1mg) of folic acid is a good supplement to start with. Many prenatal vitamins now come with DHA which is found in fish and in flax seed and is important for the developing nervous system. 300Mg is the recommended amount although I have heard up to 1000mg recommended daily. I do not recommend any single prenatal vitamin over another although it seems wise to avoid the brands where you have to take multiple pills per day, unless you and your body really like to that!

Herbal tonics are not meant to treat illness but to enhance wellness. Red raspberry is the preeminent pregnancy herb and has been used for centuries to enhance uterine function during pregnancy. Take it daily or several times daily as a tea, hot or cold. Yogi tea has a particularly good brand of "mother-to-be" tea which also has the great tonic herbs nettle and dandelion as well as good tasting stuff like anise. If you really into the herbal thing you can buy your own loose leaves and mix up your ideal brew: simmering it for half an hour or so and then letting it infuse for several hours makes a stronger brew (an infusion) which you can sip in smaller quantities.

This is not a prescription for worry, rather an opportunity for enjoying the pleasures and challenges of the kitchen... Enjoy.