

Pregnancy and prenatal vitamins

What are prenatal vitamins?

For a mother's health, and the health of her baby, she is advised to take so-called 'prenatal vitamins' during pregnancy. These are specially formulated multivitamins that make up for any nutritional deficiencies in the mother's diet. While the supplements contain numerous vitamins and minerals, their folic acid, iron, and calcium content are especially important.

Why do pregnant women need folic acid, iron and calcium?

Folic acid can reduce your risk of having a baby with a serious birth defect of the brain and spinal cord, called the 'neural tube.' A baby with spina bifida, the most common neural tube defect, is born with a spine that is not closed. The exposed nerves are damaged, leaving the child with varying degrees of paralysis, incontinence, and sometimes mental retardation.

Neural tube defects develop in the first 28 days after conception, before many women realize they are pregnant. Because about half of all pregnancies are unplanned, the Department of Health recommends that you take 400 micrograms of folic acid each day while you are trying to conceive, and should continue taking this dose for the first 12 weeks of pregnancy. . A woman who has had a prior child with a neural tube defect should discuss the appropriate dose of folic acid with her doctor before her next pregnancy. Studies have shown that taking a larger dose (up to 4,000 micrograms) at least one month before and during the first trimester may be beneficial.

There are natural sources of folic acid: green leafy vegetables, nuts, beans, and citrus fruits. It is also found in many fortified breakfast cereals and some vitamin supplements.

Calcium during pregnancy can prevent a new mother from losing her own bone density, as the foetus uses the mineral for bone growth.

Iron helps both the mother and baby's blood carry oxygen.

While a daily vitamin supplement is no substitute for a healthy diet, most women need supplements to make sure they get adequate levels of these minerals.

Are all prenatal vitamins the same?

No, they are not. Look for one that includes approximately:

- 400 mcg of folic acid
- 400 IU of vitamin D
- 200 to 300 mg of calcium
- 70 mg of vitamin C
- 3 mg of thiamine
- 2 mg of riboflavin
- 20 mg of niacine
- 6 mcg of vitamin B12
- 10 mg of vitamin E
- 15 mg of zinc
- 17 mg of iron

My prenatal vitamin makes me nauseous, what should I do?

Some prenatal vitamins can cause nausea in an already nauseous pregnant woman. If your prenatal vitamins make you sick, talk to your doctor. He or she may be able to prescribe a different kind of prenatal vitamin (for example, chewable or liquid vitamins as opposed to those you swallow whole may be better tolerated by some women).

Source: WebMD 2010