

Common question asked during pregnancy

Lifestyle

Fetal movements

Do your baby's movements slow down closer to its due date?

You may feel your baby's movements as anything from a kick or a flutter, to a roll or a swish. If your baby's movement pattern changes, the routine, strength or frequency, it may be a sign that it is unwell. There is no set number of normal movements. It is NOT TRUE that babies move less or slow down towards the end of your pregnancy. You should continue to feel your baby's regular movement patterns right up to the time of its birth. The myth that having something to eat or a cold drink to stimulate your baby does NOT work. Trust your intuition and if you are concerned about your baby's movements, contact your doctor or midwife immediately.

Sleeping position

Is lying on your back dangerous when you are pregnant?

Tossing and turning at night is common during pregnancy and at times it may be difficult to get comfortable in any position. The best position to sleep when you are pregnant, particularly after 28 weeks, is on your side. It is not a good idea to lie flat on your back, as the weight of your baby and uterus presses down on some major veins that carry blood back to the heart. This may make you feel short of breath or light-headed, and lead to lower oxygen levels in the baby which will compromise the baby's wellbeing. Recent scientific studies have shown that women who go to sleep on their back have up to an 8 times higher chance of having a stillborn baby compared to women who go to sleep in another position. Don't lie awake worrying about which position you should be in, put pillows behind your back and between your knees to prevent falling on your back and if you wake up on your back, just settle back to sleep on your side.

Exercise

Can exercise during pregnancy harm the baby or cause premature labour?

There are many benefits to be gained from regular exercise during pregnancy. These include the physical benefits and the prevention of excessive weight gain, as well as benefits for psychological wellbeing. Women with uncomplicated pregnancies should engage in regular aerobic and strength conditioning exercise, for an average 20 – 30 minutes four to five times per week. Activities that have a possibility of falling (ie horse riding, skiing, cycling) or impact to the abdomen (contact team sports) should be avoided. Further information regarding exercise during pregnancy can be found on the RANZCOG website under Patient Information.

Pain relief

Is it safe to take pain relief such as paracetamol during pregnancy?

Paracetamol (also known as Panadol) is considered safe to take if you are pregnant. It has been used routinely during all stages of pregnancy to reduce high temperatures and for pain relief. There is no clear evidence that it has any harmful effects on an unborn baby. But as with any medicine taken during pregnancy, use paracetamol at the lowest effective dose for the shortest possible time. If the recommended dose of paracetamol doesn't control your symptoms or you're in pain, contact your doctor, midwife or maternity hospital for further medical advice. The advice for taking ibuprofen when you're pregnant is different. This should not be taken during pregnancy.

Smoking, nicotine & vaping

Will smoking during pregnancy make my baby smaller?

Women should not smoke cigarettes during pregnancy. Cigarettes are harmful to not only your health, but are associated with early pregnancy loss, bleeding from the placenta (placenta abruption), prematurity, low birth weight and stillbirth. Women who smoke are more likely to give birth to a small baby, however these babies are more vulnerable to breathing problems, infections and other health issues. If you are unable to quit entirely, you should reduce smoking as much as possible. Nicotine replacement in the forms of patches and gum are safe and may be used as part of your strategy to quit. This is because the nicotine exposure is lower when used as a patch or gum than when cigarettes are smoked, as well as a reduction in the other toxins in cigarettes. Electronic cigarettes and vaporizers are another way to reduce smoking, however these should be avoided as they still deliver high levels of nicotine and their effects on pregnancy are unknown. Speak to your care provider about getting support to help you quit or reduce your smoking.

Vaccinations

Which vaccinations should I get during pregnancy?

A number of changes occur to a woman's body during pregnancy. These changes include reduced lung function, increased cardiac output, increased oxygen consumption, and changes to the immune system. Immunisation not only protects you but also your baby. Vaccinating pregnant women is the best way to protect your newborn baby. When you are vaccinated, your antibodies transfer from you to your developing baby. They receive protection from you when they are too young to be vaccinated themselves. If you are pregnant, the influenza vaccine and pertussis (whooping cough) vaccine are recommended. The influenza vaccine is recommended during every pregnancy and at any stage of your pregnancy. The pertussis vaccine is recommended between 20 and 32 weeks in every pregnancy.

Both vaccines are provided at no cost to pregnant women in Australia and New Zealand. Some other vaccines can be administered in special circumstances such as travel, but these are not routinely recommended and should be discussed with your doctor or midwife.

Air travel

At what stage of your pregnancy are you no longer allowed to take flights?

Many women will travel during pregnancy for work, recreation and visiting friends and relatives. In general, the second trimester is the safest and most comfortable time to travel. However, if you are in good health and have a normal pregnancy, there is no reason why you shouldn't be flying. Always check with your doctor or midwife prior to planning travel to ensure it is safe for you to do so. Most airlines have restrictions on pregnant women flying during late pregnancy, so check with your airline prior to travel. Additionally, you should be familiar with the available medical care at your destination and any infection exposures. Further information regarding travelling during pregnancy can be found on the RANZCOG website under Patient Information

Sex

Will sex during pregnancy harm the baby or induce labour?

Sex does not induce labour. It is completely safe to have intercourse with your partner during pregnancy unless your doctor advises you against having sex due to complications like bleeding, placenta praevia, ruptured membranes (your waters have broken), or if you are at risk of premature labour. Provided you are in a position that is comfortable and does not put a lot of pressure on your tummy, your baby is within an amniotic sac that will keep it well-protected.

Swimming & spa baths

Should spa baths and swimming pools be avoided during pregnancy?

Swimming pools and water based activities provide an almost weightless environment to exercise in. Swimming is a safe and enjoyable way to exercise while you're pregnant. It improves your circulation, increases your muscle tone and strength, and builds your stamina. Avoid heated spas and hydrotherapy pools as they have the potential to increase your core body temperature and risk overheating, dehydration and fainting.

Seatbelts

Is it safe to use a seat belt during pregnancy?

When travelling by car, you should always wear a seat belt. Your sitting position is important in minimizing injury in case of an accident. The seat belt should be a three-point restraint (that means it should have a lap strap and a shoulder strap). Make sure the seat belt lap sash is worn around your hips and under your pregnant belly. The shoulder strap should be fitted above your belly and between your breasts. Never wear the belt across or above your belly.

Weight gain

When you are pregnant, do you need to eat for two?

Many women are unaware of how much weight they should put on during pregnancy and some gain more than is ideal. A pregnant woman only needs to add a portion of extra calories to support her baby. The exact quantity of calories depends on your weight, height, level of activity, whether or not you are overweight, as well as the trimester of pregnancy.

Pregnant women should be advised to eat a healthy, well-balanced diet and on an average, consume about 350–450 additional calories per day during pregnancy (the equivalent of two healthy snacks such as a piece of fruit, hard-boiled egg, hummus with vegetable sticks or berry smoothie). There is no need to 'eat for two' as was previously thought.

Alcohol

Is an occasional glass of wine okay during pregnancy?

Some people believe that drinking an occasional glass of wine is harmless during pregnancy and can have no effect on the baby. The sensitivity of the baby to the adverse effects of alcohol varies between women and between the different stages of pregnancy. Babies of mothers who have consumed higher levels of alcohol during pregnancy have a higher chance of malformations and developmental delays including Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. Currently there is no consensus on the safe level of alcohol during pregnancy so alcohol should be avoided.

Caffeine

Is caffeine safe to have during pregnancy?

For a long time, coffee, tea and other caffeinated drinks have been feared by pregnant women as being harmful to their unborn babies. It's true that caffeine crosses the placenta, meaning when you load up on lattes, both you and baby feel a buzz. But a small cup of coffee or tea a day is perfectly fine.

So how much coffee or tea can you drink? It all depends on the type of drink and its caffeine content. Ultimately, you have to make the decision for yourself. If abstinence is not possible, then moderation is key. You also have to be aware that you could consume caffeine not only from coffee, but also from tea, cola and other soda drinks (including energy drinks), chocolate and even some over-the-counter medications, such as painkillers.

Fish consumption

Is it safe to eat fish during pregnancy?

Fish is a source of essential fatty acids, which are important for a baby's growth and development. DHA (polyunsaturated fatty acids) is an important unsaturated omega-3 fatty acid found in oily fish like salmon and tuna that helps with a baby's eye and brain development. However fish can also be a source of mercury which can cause neurologic (brain, spine, nervous system) damage. Pregnant women should try to consume 2–3 servings per week of fish with high DHA and low mercury content. Generally speaking, the larger the type of fish (ie shark), the larger the mercury content. Examples of fish that contain lower levels of mercury include salmon and canned tuna. For women who do not consume two to three servings of fish per week, taking fish oil has shown no improvement in outcomes in children.

Pregnant women should avoid raw and undercooked fish. However sushi that was prepared in a clean and reputable kitchen is not likely to place the pregnancy at risk.

Foods to avoid

Which foods should be avoided during pregnancy?

Food precautions are important during pregnancy to avoid potentially harmful bacteria and prevent exposure to disease such as toxoplasmosis and listeria which can cause birth defects, miscarriage and stillbirth. While cooking and pasteurisation can kill bacteria, there are other important tips to follow:

Avoid eating raw and undercooked meat (including deli meats)

Avoid eating undercooked fish or shellfish

Avoid unpasteurized dairy products

Do not eat soft cheeses

Wash all fruits and vegetables before eating them

Wash hands, knives, and cutting boards after handling uncooked foods

Avoid foods recalled for contamination

The pregnancy glow myth has some truth to it?

During pregnancy, there is increased blood flow in your body, which keeps your skin moisturised and nourished. This, paired with a surge in hormones, can contribute to a healthier and brighter looking skin. However, not every woman is lucky to experience this. Many women also face acne breakouts and other skin problems that may leave their skin looking and feeling worse.

The consolation is that most of these conditions disappear after pregnancy. Your skin may also be more sensitive than it was pre-pregnancy, and the fewer chemicals you're exposed to, the less likely you are to have a reaction. Remember, what goes on your skin can eventually go into your body and bloodstream. Generally, most facial products are safe during pregnancy as only a small amount of active ingredients can pass into your blood stream.

Look closely at labels and any chemicals that you and your baby may be exposed to. Despite the low risk suggested in studies, experts still suggest pregnant women avoid applying vitamin A based formulations to their skin during early pregnancy. If you have used a cosmetic containing retinol or a similar vitamin A product during pregnancy, there's no need to panic. Stop using the product and consult with your health care professional.

Fake tan

Can you use fake tan during pregnancy?

The active ingredient in fake tan reacts with the cells in the outer most layer of skin, producing a brown pigment called melanoidin. Fortunately it doesn't penetrate the skin much further, so isn't absorbed by the blood stream and therefore can't harm your baby. It's generally considered safe to use fake tan creams and lotions during pregnancy, but it's probably best to avoid spray tans, because the effects of inhaling the spray are not known.

Hair dyes

Is it safe to dye your hair during pregnancy?

During pregnancy, there has always been the myth that dyeing your hair can harm your baby. Fortunately this one is not true. The chemicals in both permanent and semi-permanent hair dye aren't readily absorbed through the scalp and as a result are unlikely to cause any harm to your baby. You do need to understand that research in this area is limited, however colouring your hair during pregnancy is considered safe.

If you are a little worried about any potential absorption, you may consider waiting until 12 weeks to dye your hair to prevent baby being potentially exposed to chemicals whilst his/her vital organs are forming. You can also decrease absorption by minimising or avoiding any scalp exposure to chemicals, using semi-permanent vegetable dye, leaving the dye in for the minimum amount of time required and thoroughly rinse your hair at the end of the treatment.

If you're a hairdresser there is no need to worry. There is no evidence that working with hair dyes can harm your baby. Just ensure you wear gloves and work in a well-ventilated salon.

Manicures & pedicures

Should you avoid manicures during pregnancy?

Just like hair dye, the chemicals used in nail treatments are in low doses and not readily absorbed by your skin. So follow the same simple steps as for hair colouring to minimise potential absorption and therefore the risk to your baby. If you have any cuts to the nail bed it's best to avoid any nail treatments and make sure your nail technician is using sterilised tools to prevent infections. If you don't know what kind of nail polish your salon uses, you need to advise them that they should avoid polishes that have dibutyl phthalate, toluene or formaldehyde in them. Fortunately in pregnancy your nails are usually healthier and stronger, so for some women manicures during pregnancy are not required.

Botox & dermal fillers

Is it safe to have Botox during pregnancy?

Botox or botulinum toxin is used for cosmetic purposes as well as for headaches. Despite the fact that it is used in women who might be pregnant there is limited research to show whether or not it has effects on pregnancy or the baby. Botox is a large molecule that doesn't cross the placenta. However, whilst it might not cross over to baby it has been shown in animals that high levels of Botox resulted in miscarriage. It is for this reason that Botox should not be used during pregnancy. The same considerations should be made for dermal fillers.

Waxing

Should you stop waxing during pregnancy?

During pregnancy, you can continue with your waxing regime. The only issue is that you might find your skin becomes more sensitive especially in the pubic area. This is due to changes to your hormones and the blood flow to that area in particular. Waxing might also result in some bruising. The use of chemical products such as creams, lotion, powder, gel, roll-on or spray forms that get rid of hair might result in an allergic reaction that wasn't present when you weren't pregnant. If you have an allergy, don't use it anymore and try a small patch test after pregnancy.