



Food safety in pregnancy

When you're pregnant it's important to choose your food carefully. Find out which foods are safe to eat and which should be avoided. The chart at the end provides more detailed information on foods in each food group.

Alcohol

It's best to avoid alcohol completely during pregnancy as it can harm your baby. No amount of alcohol is safe during pregnancy.

If you need help to stop drinking, talk with your doctor, midwife or obstetrician.

Caffeine

Too much caffeine may increase the chance of miscarriage, or your baby being born with a low birth weight. You should limit caffeine to 200mg per day. That's about:

- 1 to 2 cups of espresso coffee
- 2 to 3 cups of instant coffee
- 3 to 5 cups of tea (depending on strength), hot chocolate or cola drinks.

Energy drinks like Red Bull and V contain caffeine or guarana (another source of caffeine). It's best not to have these drinks when you're pregnant.

Mercury and fish

Most fish have essential nutrients for your baby's brain and nervous system development, like omega-3 oils and iodine.

It's recommended you have 1 to 3 serves of fish each week. Snack sized tins of tuna and salmon have less than half a serve and are safe to eat several times a week.

However, some fish have high levels of mercury, which can be harmful to your baby, such as:

- shark (flake)
- marlin
- broadbill
- swordfish
- orange roughy (also called deep sea perch)
- catfish.

Refer to the 'safe foods' chart for more detail on these fish.

Other seafood like shellfish and crustaceans (e.g. prawns, shrimps) generally have lower mercury levels and are safe unless you regularly eat large amounts of them.

Vitamin A and liver

Liver has high levels of a form of vitamin A called retinol. This may be harmful to a developing baby. Limit liver to very small amounts, no more than 50 grams a week.

Other foods with vitamin A are safe.

Pregnancy multivitamins contain a safe form of vitamin A called beta carotene. However, regular multivitamins that are not made for pregnancy might have retinol. Check with your pharmacist if you're not sure.

Food contamination

Some bacteria (germs) that cause food poisoning can create problems during pregnancy. You can reduce this risk by keeping things clean, handling food safely and avoiding high-risk foods.

Listeria

Listeria bacteria can contaminate food and cause a flu-like infection. In pregnancy, this infection can be passed on to the baby and can cause miscarriage, stillbirth or premature birth. Listeria infection is uncommon but is dangerous for you and your baby. To reduce the chance of infection:

- wash your hands well and use clean utensils when preparing food
- eat freshly prepared foods when possible
- wash raw vegetables and fruit carefully
- avoid high-risk foods like:
 - refrigerated, ready-to-eat foods that may have been stored for a long time
 - pate
 - cold, cooked chicken and deli meats, such as ham or salami, unless they're reheated to a high temperature, like on a pizza
 - coleslaws, salads and fruit salads unless you're sure they're freshly prepared
 - soft cheeses, like brie, camembert, ricotta, feta and blue cheese; but soft cheeses in cooked dishes are safe
 - soft serve ice-cream and dairy products that haven't been pasteurised (a process that kills bacteria in foods)
 - uncooked or smoked seafood and pre-cooked prawns; freshly cooked seafood and canned seafood is safe.
- When cooking or reheating food, make sure it's steaming hot, as heat kills listeria.

Salmonella

Salmonella food poisoning can give you nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea and fever. In rare cases it can cause a miscarriage. To prevent salmonella poisoning:

- don't eat raw or undercooked (runny) eggs
- avoid foods that have raw eggs in them
- avoid using eggs with cracked shells.
- avoid raw sesame seeds and their products, including tahini, halva and hummus. Sesame seeds that have been heat treated are safe to eat.

Toxoplasmosis

Toxoplasmosis is an infection that can harm a baby's brain and eyes. It can be found in raw meat and cat faeces (poo). To reduce the chance of infection:

- cook meat thoroughly
- wash fruit and vegetables carefully
- wear rubber gloves when handling cat litter
- wash your hands well after gardening or handling pets.

Tips for handling food safely

- Wash your hands before you prepare or eat food.
- Use separate, clean chopping boards to avoid mixing raw and cooked foods.
- Make sure cooked foods are thoroughly cooked.
- Refrigerate hot food as soon as they stop steaming; don't let them cool on the bench for too long.
- Eat food that has been taken out of the fridge as soon as possible – preferably within 2 hours and definitely within 4 hours. If food has been out of the fridge for 4 or more hours, throw it out.
- Eat leftover foods within 24 hours and reheat them until they're steaming hot.
- Keep the fridge clean and below 5 degrees.
- Cover stored foods.

- Thaw frozen food in the fridge or microwave, not at room temperature.
- Keep raw meat in the fridge below other foods to prevent meat juices dripping onto other foods.
- Keep eggs in the fridge.
- Check the ‘best before’ and ‘use by’ dates on your foods and follow storage instructions. If in doubt, throw it out.

For more information

Food Standards Australia New Zealand

Mercury in fish

foodstandards.gov.au/consumer/chemicals

Better Health Channel

Toxoplasmosis

betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/toxoplasmosis

Pregnancy, Birth & Baby

Healthy diet during pregnancy

pregnancybirthbaby.org.au/healthy-diet-during-pregnancy

Women's Alcohol and Drug Service

Royal Women's Hospital

Monday to Friday, 8.30am–5.30pm

Tel: (03) 8345 3931

Email: wads@thewomens.org.au

On the Women's website

Using alcohol during pregnancy and breastfeeding

thewomens.r.worldssl.net/images/uploads/fact-sheets/Alcohol-2021.pdf

Family Violence Support

1800 Respect National Helpline

Support for people impacted by sexual assault, domestic or family violence and abuse.

1800 737 732 (24-hour support service)

1800respect.org.au

Do you need an interpreter?



If you need an interpreter, you can ask for one.

Choosing safe foods during pregnancy: What to eat and what to avoid

	Eat	Avoid	Limit
Fresh meat and chicken	<p>Thoroughly cooked meat and chicken. Store any leftovers in the fridge and use within 24 hours, making sure you reheat them thoroughly before eating.</p> <p>Hot takeaway chicken is safe if it's freshly cooked and still hot. Store any leftovers in the fridge as soon as possible, or within 2 hours. Reheat thoroughly and eat within 24 hours.</p>	Don't eat raw or undercooked meat.	
Liver			Limit liver to 50 grams per week due to its high levels of vitamin A (retinol).
Cold meats, pates and pastes	<p>Processed meats are safe if thoroughly cooked, steaming hot and eaten soon afterwards, like on a pizza.</p> <p>Pate, meat paste or fish pastes in cans or jars are safe at room temperature until opened. Put them in the fridge after opening.</p>	<p>Don't eat packaged or unpackaged ready-to-eat meats, such as ham, salami, pre-prepared chicken, or chicken loaf, unless they're reheated and steaming hot.</p> <p>Don't assume freshly sliced deli meats are safer than pre-packaged ones. They can be contaminated by the meat slicer.</p> <p>Don't eat cold meats, chicken or turkey from sandwich shops and cafes.</p> <p>Avoid pate that needs refrigeration before opening.</p>	

	Eat	Avoid	Limit
Fish and seafood	<p>Freshly cooked fish are safe, but there are some you should limit (see limit column).</p> <p>1 to 3 serves of fish per week is recommended. The serving size is 150g.</p> <p>A small can of tuna is half a serving, so you can eat several cans each week.</p> <p>You can also eat:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • freshly cooked seafood such as shellfish and crustaceans, e.g. prawns, lobster • canned seafood including smoked oysters and mussels, • freshly made sushi without raw or smoked seafood. 	<p>Pre-cooked prawns as they may not be freshly cooked.</p> <p>Uncooked or smoked seafood like smoked salmon, except if canned.</p> <p>Raw fish or seafood.</p> <p>Sushi with raw or smoked seafood, or sushi that isn't freshly made.</p>	<p>Limit the following fish to once a fortnight, and don't eat any other fish during that time:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • shark (flake) • swordfish • broadbill • marlin. <p>Limit these fish to once a week, and don't eat any other fish during that time:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • orange roughy (sea perch) • catfish.
Dairy foods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Milk • Yoghurt • Cream • Buttermilk • Custard • Ice-cream (not soft serve) • Hard cheeses • Processed cheese • Cream cheese • Cheese spreads • Cottage cheese (follow the storage instructions on the pack) • Paneer. 	<p>Unpasteurised milk and dairy foods.</p> <p>Soft serve ice-cream and smoothies made with soft serve ice-cream, because the dispensing machine may not be thoroughly cleaned.</p> <p>The following cheeses, unless used in a cooked dish:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • brie • camembert • ricotta • feta • blue cheese. 	

	Eat	Avoid	Limit
Eggs	Eggs that have been cooked thoroughly until the yolk thickens.	Raw or runny eggs. Foods that may contain raw eggs, like mousse, eggnog, home-made mayonnaise, aioli, Caesar salads in restaurants. Tasting uncooked cake batter that has eggs in it.	
Vegetables and herbs	Fresh cooked vegetables (wash before cooking). Canned and frozen vegetables. Freshly prepared salads, except those with raw alfalfa, bean sprouts or snow pea sprouts.	Pre-prepared salads from salad bars or smorgasbords as they might not be fresh. Sprouted seeds such as alfalfa, bean sprouts or snow pea sprouts unless thoroughly cooked.	
Fruit	All types are safe except store-bought, pre-cut fruit. If you're eating whole fruit, wash it before eating. Buy whole rockmelon (cantaloupe) and clean the skin before cutting.	Store-bought, pre-cut fruit, especially rockmelon. Freshly squeezed juices and smoothies from cafes and juice bars because they use pre-cut fruit, and their juicing machines can be hard to clean.	
Mayonnaise and dips	Store-bought mayonnaise is safe if kept in the fridge and following storage instructions.	Homemade and cafe-made mayonnaise which may contain raw eggs. Dips that contain feta or ricotta cheese.	
Soy products	All soy products like tofu, soy milk and soy yoghurt are safe.		

	Eat	Avoid	Limit
Sesame seeds	Sesame products that have been heated, like sesame oil and sesame seeds on baked products such as bread.	Sesame seed and sesame products made from ground or whole sesame seeds like tahini, halva and hummus.	
Canned and bottled foods	All are safe, just follow the storage instructions after opening.		
Eating out and takeaway foods	Choose food that is freshly cooked and make sure hot food is steaming hot.	Pre-made food if you think it has been stored for a long time. Salad bars and smorgasbords. Sushi containing raw or smoked seafood or isn't freshly prepared.	
Leftovers	Eat cold foods within 4 hours of preparation, unless they've been refrigerated. Cooked leftovers are safe if you refrigerate them as soon as they've stopped steaming. Eat them within a day after thoroughly reheating. Or freeze them and reheat them later.		
Drinks	Artificial sweeteners are safe if used in moderation.	Alcohol Energy drinks that contain guarana or caffeine such as V, Red Bull, Mother.	Limit caffeine-containing drinks to 200mg per day, or: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1-2 cups of espresso style coffee • 3 cups of instant coffee • 4-5 cups of tea, hot chocolate or cola drinks.

Disclaimer: This fact sheet provides general information only. For specific advice about your or your baby's healthcare needs, you should seek advice from your health professional. The Royal Women's Hospital does not accept any responsibility for loss or damage arising from your reliance on this fact sheet instead of seeing a health professional. If you or your baby require urgent medical attention, please contact your nearest emergency department.
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