



How a Healthy Diet Helps You Breastfeed

For centuries, new mothers have been promised that certain foods or regimens will increase their milk production, stimulate their babies' development, or speed their own return to their prepregnancy state. We now know that a normal, healthy diet is all it really takes for a breastfeeding mother to maintain her milk supply and sustain both her baby's and her own health. Still, certain components of this normal diet are especially important when your body is producing milk.



Calcium

Calcium is among the most important minerals in your diet. Your body stores of calcium (primarily from your bones) supply much of the calcium in your breast milk to meet your baby's calcium needs. Studies show that women lose 3 to 5 percent of their bone mass when they are breastfeeding. After you finish breastfeeding, your body must replenish the calcium that was used to produce your milk. Making sure you consume the recommended amount of calcium in a normal diet—1,000 milligrams daily for all women ages eighteen to fifty and 1,300 milligrams for teenage mothers—helps ensure that your bones will remain strong after you have weaned your baby. The good news is that you recover the bone lost during breastfeeding within the six-month period after you wean your baby.

By consuming three servings of dairy products—8 ounces of milk is one serving—per day, you should receive the calcium you need. If you dislike milk, you can get the calcium you need from cheese and yogurt. If you are allergic to dairy products, try calcium-fortified juice, tofu, dark leafy greens such as spinach and kale, broccoli, or dried beans. You can also get calcium in fortified foods such as breakfast cereal. (Contrary to popular myth, it is not necessary to drink milk to make milk.)

If you do not routinely consume 1,000 milligrams of calcium in your diet, talk to your doctor or nutritionist about a dietary supplement of calcium. (Avoid supplements made from crushed oyster shells, though, because of concern about lead from these sources.) Consuming 1,000 milligrams of calcium daily—not only while breastfeeding but throughout life until you reach menopause—will decrease your risk of osteoporosis in later life.

Vitamin D

Vitamin D—often known as the “sunshine vitamin”—is just as important as calcium when it comes to maintaining bone strength. Vitamin D is essential for absorbing dietary calcium from your intestinal tract. The amount of vitamin D you need depends on whom you ask. Most experts currently recommend getting at least 400 IU of vitamin D a day, but some suggest getting as much as 1,000 IU.

Exposure to sunlight is one of the best ways to get your vitamin D, but it's not the safest, given concerns about skin cancer. It's also unreliable and depends a great deal on where you live. Instead, you should look to get vitamin D from foods such as salmon, mackerel, fortified milk or orange juice, and yogurt. Some ready-to-eat breakfast cereals are fortified with vitamin D. You can get vitamin D from supplements, too.

Keep in mind, though, that your baby still needs vitamin D supplementation (/English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/Vitamin-D-And-Your-Baby.aspx), even if you're taking a supplement. Breast milk does not provide babies with enough vitamin D. Exclusively breastfed infants or those getting less than 32 ounces of vitamin D-fortified formula per day need 400 IU of vitamin D per day, because sunlight exposure can no longer be safely recommended as their primary source of vitamin D. Babies exclusively breastfed may develop a condition called rickets when adequate vitamin D is not provided. Make sure to talk to your baby's doctor about the need for supplementation.

Protein

Protein is another component of a healthy diet that demands your attention while you are breastfeeding. Protein repairs, and maintains body tissues. You need 6 to 6½ ounces a day when you're nursing. You can get it best by two or three servings of lean meat, poultry, or fish, usually about 3 ounces (the size of a deck of cards) in a serving. You can also get 1-ounce equivalents of protein from 1 egg, 1 tablespoon of peanut butter, nuts (12 almonds or

24 pistachios, for instance), or dried beans (¾ cup cooked). It's also a good idea to include fish in your weekly diet as one source of protein, especially fatty fish such as salmon, tuna, and mackerel. These types of fish are rich sources of DHA (docosahexaenoic acid), an omega-3 fatty acid that is found in breast milk and contributes to growth and development of an infant's brain and eyes. In addition, DHA content of milk declines with breastfeeding and can be replenished by eating fatty fish. As always, it's best to vary your choices as much as possible, while keeping saturated fat intake to moderate levels. To do that, choose lean meats or low-fat varieties whenever possible.

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Since peanuts are one of the foods most likely to cause an allergic response in both children and adults, be sure to monitor your baby's response when you eat foods containing peanuts, especially if there is a family history of food allergies (</English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/Food-Allergies-in-Children.aspx>).

Iron

Iron helps breastfeeding mothers (and everyone else) maintain their energy level, so be sure to get enough of this important mineral in your diet. Lean meats and dark leafy green vegetables are good sources of iron. Other sources of iron include fish, ironfortified cereals, and the dark meat in poultry.

When it comes to meeting your iron needs, it's important to eat the best sources of iron and to pair them with the right foods. Iron from animal sources, for instance, is generally better absorbed than iron from plant sources. Tea may interfere with iron absorption, so you may want to avoid drinking tea when you eat iron-rich foods or take iron supplements. On the other hand, foods that are rich in vitamin C can enhance iron absorption. So consider pairing ground beef with spinach, or take your multivitamin/mineral supplement with a glass of orange juice.

Folic Acid

Nursing mothers (along with all women of childbearing age) should get at least 400 micrograms of folate, or folic acid (</English/ages-stages/prenatal/Pages/Where-We-Stand-Folic-Acid.aspx>), daily to prevent birth defects in future children and ensure their babies' continued normal development. Spinach and other green vegetables are excellent sources of folic acid, as are citrus fruits or juices, many kinds of beans, and meat or poultry liver. You can also get folic acid from breads, cereal, and grains, which are enriched with folate in the United States. All women in their reproductive years are encouraged to take a multivitamin supplement that provides 400 micrograms of folate daily.

A Word on Supplements

To make sure you are getting all of the important vitamins and minerals, you may want to continue taking your daily prenatal vitamin or a daily multivitamin. Keep in mind, though, that these supplements are an *addition* to a healthy diet, not a replacement. The fact is, there is no replacement for a daily intake of fresh vitamin- and mineral-rich foods.

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