

# Healthy eating when you're breastfeeding

**The Women's encourages you to breastfeed your baby. Breastmilk is the perfect food for your baby.**

## Why breastfeed?

Breastmilk:

- is made for your baby's developing digestive system
- protects your baby against infection, diarrhoea and allergies
- is ready to use, at the right temperature and free.

Your diet is important too. Eating well while breastfeeding gives you the extra nutrients you need and helps you cope with the physical demands of caring for a new baby. Try to eat regular, varied meals whenever you can.

See the [healthy food groups guide](#) and [sample meal plans](#) at the end of this fact sheet to see what foods to eat each day and how to fit them into your everyday meals.

## Important nutrients you need while breastfeeding

### Protein

Breastmilk contains protein, which helps your baby grow. Good sources of protein when breastfeeding include meat, chicken, eggs, cheese, yoghurt, nuts, tofu, lentils, baked beans and split peas.

### Calcium

Calcium helps build strong bones for you and your baby. Dairy foods are the best source of calcium.

Fish with edible bones, like canned salmon and sardines, also provide calcium.

There are small amounts of calcium in other foods, but most calcium comes from dairy foods.

If you drink soy, almond or rice milk, check the label. Choose a brand with at least 100mg of calcium per 100ml – about the same as cow's milk. Low fat dairy foods have the same amount of calcium as full fat versions.

### Vitamin D

Vitamin D helps your body absorb and use calcium. You get most of your vitamin D from sunlight on your skin. You also get a little from foods like oily fish, egg yolk and margarine.

Many people don't get enough vitamin D. If you have darker skin, stay indoors a lot or cover most of your body in clothing, your vitamin D may be low.

Very low vitamin D can cause weak bones and muscle pain in adults and bone problems in babies. If you think you're at risk, ask your doctor to check your vitamin D levels. If it's low, you'll need a supplement.

Babies get some vitamin D from breastmilk, but it might not be enough. All babies need a daily vitamin D supplement of 400 international units (IU) for their first 12 months.

Not all vitamin D supplements are safe for babies, so ask your pharmacist to recommend one.

## Iron

When you're pregnant, your iron levels can become low and leave you feeling tired. While breastfeeding, it's important to keep your iron levels up.

The richest sources of iron are liver, meat, chicken, and fish. You can also get iron from beans, lentils, whole grains, breakfast cereals, green leafy vegetables and drinks like Milo and Ovaltine.

If you had low iron during pregnancy, ask your doctor if you should keep taking iron tablets while breastfeeding.

## Iodine

Iodine helps your baby's brain develop. During pregnancy and breastfeeding, you need more iodine than usual. But it can be hard to get enough iodine from food.

Seafood, dairy foods, and iodine added to bread flour provides some iodine, but this may not be enough when breastfeeding. Breastfeeding increases your needs by an 150 micrograms (mcg or µg) a day. Most pregnancy and breastfeeding multivitamins have this amount.

If you regularly use salt in cooking or at table, change to iodised salt to get more iodine.

## Fluids

When you're breastfeeding, your body needs plenty of fluids to replace the fluid used in breastmilk. You may feel more thirsty than usual. Drink enough to satisfy your thirst - usually at least 8 cups a day. All fluids count, but water is the healthiest choice. Sugary drinks like fruit juice, soft drink or cordial can fill you up and may reduce your appetite for more nutritious foods.

## If you're vegan, vegetarian or don't eat meat

You can meet your nutritional needs when breastfeeding if you're vegan, vegetarian or you're avoiding animal foods. You just need to plan your meals carefully. Focus on getting enough protein, iron, vitamin B12 and calcium.

**Protein and iron:** Nuts, seeds, beans, lentils, tofu and hummus, are good sources of protein and iron (see the table on page 4 for serving sizes).

Iron from these foods is not absorbed as easily as it is from meat, so include other iron-rich foods like wholegrain cereals, iron-enriched breakfast cereals, wholegrain breads, and green leafy vegetables. Drinks like Milo and Ovaltine are also contain iron.

Eating vitamin C-rich fruits and vegetables with iron foods helps your body absorb iron better.

**Calcium:** If you don't eat dairy foods, choose calcium-fortified plant milks (like soy) or take a calcium supplement.

**Vitamin B12:** This vitamin is important for your baby's blood, nerve, and brain development.

B12 is only naturally found in food from animals, like meat, dairy foods and eggs. If you eat few or no animal foods, you may not get enough B12. Some plant-based milks and meat substitutes have added B12, but it may not be enough if other sources of B12 are limited.

Low B12 can happen quickly during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Breastfed babies of vegan people are at higher risk of not getting enough B12. If you might be at risk, have your B12 levels checked and talk to your dietitian or doctor about supplements.

## Can you drink alcohol while breastfeeding?

Avoid alcohol when you're getting breastfeeding started. This helps your baby get enough milk and settles into a sleep-wake pattern. This can take at least 4 weeks.

If you choose to drink alcohol, wait at least 2 hours after 1 standard drink before breastfeeding to ensure your breastmilk is alcohol free.

See the resources below for more information.

## Are herbal and traditional medicines safe to take while breastfeeding?

Some herbal preparations can pass through the breastmilk to your baby and may be harmful. Always check with a health professional before taking them.

Read more in our fact sheet, Herbal medicines in pregnancy and breastfeeding  
[thewomens.org.au/health-information/fact-sheets#herbal-and-traditional-medicines-and-pregnancy](http://thewomens.org.au/health-information/fact-sheets#herbal-and-traditional-medicines-and-pregnancy)

## How long can you breastfeed your baby?

Breastmilk alone gives your baby all the nutrients they need for the first 6 months. After that, you can slowly add solids while continuing to breastfeed.

Breastmilk stays an important part of your baby's diet for at least the first year. You can keep breastfeeding for comfort, nutrition, and protection for as long as you and your baby want.

## Do you need an interpreter?



You can ask for an interpreter if you need one.

## Family Violence Support

### 1800 Respect National Helpline

You can get help if you have experienced sexual assault, domestic or family violence and abuse.

You can call any time of day or night.

1800 737 732

[1800respect.org.au](http://1800respect.org.au)

## For more information

### Royal Women's Hospital

Visit the Women's website for more information about breastfeeding.  
[thewomens.org.au/health-information](http://thewomens.org.au/health-information)

### Australian Breastfeeding Association (ABA)

The ABA website has a range of resources including information on alcohol and breastfeeding, and caffeine and breastfeeding.

Tel: 1800 686 268 (Breastfeeding Helpline)  
[breastfeeding.asn.au](http://breastfeeding.asn.au)

### Feed Safe

A free app developed by ABA, Reach Health Promotion Innovations and Curtin University aims to help people make the best choices about how to breastfeed and drink alcohol safely.

[feedsafe.net](http://feedsafe.net)

### Eat for Health

Visit the Australian Dietary Guidelines website for advice and resources about healthy eating, including information about the best foods for infants. Look for the brochure 'Giving your baby the best start'.  
[eatforhealth.gov.au](http://eatforhealth.gov.au)

## Healthy food groups guide

Use this guide to eat a variety of foods and eat more or less depending on your appetite.

Food group	Daily serves	Each item is an example of a serve
Vegetables and legumes (beans, lentils, chickpeas)	7 ½ - 5 serves if you're 18 or younger	A serve is around 75g or <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ½ cup vegetables</li> <li>• 1 cup salad vegetables</li> <li>• ½ medium potato or sweet potato</li> <li>• ½ cup cooked dried or canned legumes</li> </ul>
Fruit	2	A serve is around 150g or <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 medium fruit</li> <li>• 2 smaller fruits, like apricots or plums</li> <li>• 1 cup diced or canned fruit or berries</li> <li>• 30g dried fruit, like 4 apricot halves or 1 ½ tablespoons sultanas</li> </ul>
Meat and meat alternatives	3 ½	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 palm sized (100g) piece of cooked meat or chicken</li> <li>• 1 medium fillet fish (150g)</li> <li>• 2 eggs</li> <li>• 1 cup (150g) cooked or canned legumes, like lentils, chickpeas or kidney beans</li> <li>• ¾ cup (170g) tofu</li> <li>• 1 handful (40g) nuts or seeds</li> <li>• 40g nut butter</li> </ul>
Dairy or alternatives	2 ½ - 4 serves if you're 18 or younger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 cup (250ml) milk</li> <li>• 2 slices (40g) cheese</li> <li>• 1 small carton (200g) yoghurt</li> <li>• 1 cup (250ml) soy, rice, almond or other calcium-fortified plant milk with at least 100g of added calcium per 100mls</li> </ul>
Grain foods (breads and cereals)	9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 slice (40g) bread or 1 chapatti,</li> <li>• ½ Lebanese bread or 3 crisp breads or ½ medium roll</li> <li>• ¾ cup (30g) cereal flakes</li> <li>• ½ cup (75 to 120g) cooked rice, pasta, noodles or quinoa</li> </ul>
Unsaturated oils and spreads	Optional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 14 to 20g per day – around 1 to 2 tablespoons</li> </ul>

Limit foods that are high in added fats and sugars, like cakes, biscuits, pastries, high fat takeaway foods and sugary drinks and juices.

Small amounts are okay but eating too much can make you gain extra weight or take the place of healthier foods.

## Sample meal plans

Eating the recommended daily serves from the 5 food groups (see the [Healthy food groups table](#)) is easier than it seems. With a few simple choices you can easily meet your daily targets. These sample meal plans show the food groups and how many serves each meal provides.

Meal	Food	Portion size	Food group and number of serves
Breakfast	Wholegrain breakfast cereal, with reduced fat milk	60g cereal 1 cup (250ml) reduced fat milk	2 grain serves 1 dairy or alternatives serve
	Toast	1 slice	1 grain serve
Morning snack	English muffin	1 small	1 grain serve
Lunch	Sandwich with chicken and salad	2 slices bread	2 grain serves
		50g chicken	½ meat or alternative serve
		1 cup salad vegetables 1 tomato	1 vegetable serve 1 vegetable serve
	Apple	1 medium	1 fruit serve
Afternoon snack	Crisp bread	3 (35g)	1 grain serve
	Cheese	1 slice	½ dairy or alternatives serve
Dinner	Pasta with beef mince and red kidney beans	1 ½ cups of cooked pasta	2 ½ grain serves
		100g cooked mince	1 meat or alternative serve
		¼ cup kidney beans	½ vegetable serves 1 ½ vegetable serves ½ vegetable serves
	Tomato and green salad	1 ½ medium tomato	1 ½ vegetable serves
		½ onion	½ vegetable serve
		1 ½ cups green leafy salad ½ tomato	
Supper	Apricots and reduced fat yoghurt	1 cup stewed/tinned apricots	1 fruit serve
		100g (½ small tub) yoghurt	1 dairy or alternatives serve

For more information and tips on planning healthy meals visit the [Eat for Health website](#).

**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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