Preventing Birth Defects With a Healthy Pregnancy Diet

Pregnancy is a time in which nutrition is very important for the health of both mother and baby. Women who are pregnant are encouraged to eat a healthy diet with a variety of food groups.

HEALTHY DIET

- **Fruits and vegetables:** Fruits and vegetables are healthy choices for both mother and baby. Eating a variety of fruits and vegetables throughout pregnancy helps provide vitamins and minerals.
- **Dairy and calcium-rich foods:** Both mother and baby need calcium for strong bones and teeth. Calcium also helps the circulatory, muscular, and nervous systems run normally. Dairy products are the richest source of calcium; many fruit juices and cereals are also fortified with calcium.
- **Lean protein:** Protein is important for a baby’s growth, especially during the second and third trimesters. Lean meat, poultry, fish, and eggs are good sources of protein. Other options include beans, tofu, dairy products, and peanut butter.
- **Breads and grains:** Mothers should choose grains that are high in fiber and enriched such as whole-grain breads, cereals, pasta, and rice.
- **Iron-rich foods:** Iron is important for the body to make hemoglobin, a protein in the red blood cells that delivers oxygen to tissues. During pregnancy, a mother’s body needs additional iron to have enough oxygen for herself and her child. Good iron sources include lean red meat, poultry, and fish. Other sources include iron-fortified breakfast cereals, nuts, and dried fruit.

VITAMIN-RICH FOODS

Pregnancy is also a time in which certain vitamins are particularly important to promote a baby’s growth and development.

- **Folic acid:** Folic acid is a B vitamin that helps prevent neural tube defects, which are serious abnormalities of the brain and spinal cord. Many cereals are fortified with folic acid. Other sources include dark-green leafy vegetables and beans.
- **Vitamin C:** Foods rich in vitamin C include oranges, grapefruits, strawberries, honeydew, papaya, broccoli, cauliflower, brussel sprouts, green peppers, tomatoes, and mustard greens.
- **Vitamin D:** Vitamin D helps build a baby’s bones and teeth. Good sources of Vitamin D include fatty fish such as salmon and tuna as well as fortified milk or juice.

ADDITIONAL RESEARCH

A recent study in the *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* found exciting new information about the relationship between a healthy diet and the prevention of birth defects in babies. In this study, higher maternal diet quality was associated with lower risks of neural tube defects and having a cleft lip or palate. This research study helps us understand the importance of eating a high-quality diet that is varied and includes foods such as those just described to help prevent birth defects.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Mayo Clinic
http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/pregnancy-nutrition/PR00110

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