

Nutritional Supplements in Pregnancy

Prenatal Vitamins:

Prenatal vitamins are fortified with folate and are available over-the-counter (OTC) or by prescription. If you have severe nausea or are unable to take the vitamins, you can purchase 400 mcg of folic acid by itself. There is no data that after the first trimester prenatal vitamins are beneficial.

Folic Acid or Folate:

Folate is a “B” vitamin that may lower the incidence of neural tube defects in your growing baby. Women at average risk of having a baby with a neural tube defect (NTD) need 400 mcg of folate daily. Over the counter prenatal vitamins contain 400 - 800 mcg of folic acid while prescription vitamins contain 1000 mcg. of folate. Foods rich in folic acid include beans, lentils, peanuts, sunflower seeds, walnuts, almonds, orange juice, pineapple, cantaloupe, bananas, avocados, broccoli, asparagus, spinach, dark green lettuce and okra. Many cereals and breads may be fortified with folate. The nutrition label on the foods should list any supplements. Patients with a history of a pregnancy complicated by a NTD need higher folate doses.

Iron Supplements:

It is generally recommended that pregnant women should ingest 30 mg of iron per day. A blood count will be drawn during your pregnancy at the first visit and again in the third trimester to determine whether you have an iron deficiency anemia. If you are recommended to take an iron supplement, it can be purchased without a prescription. The different preparations may be ferrous sulfate, ferrous gluconate or ferrous fumarate. Your body will absorb only a small amount each day so any of these preparations is adequate for iron supplementation. Some iron preparations contain vitamin C, which increases iron absorption or a stool softener if you have problems with constipation. If you are taking more than one iron tablet per day, separate the times that you take it. For more information, see Iron sources.

Calcium:

The recommended daily allowance during pregnancy is 1000 mg daily. Supplements can be purchased without a prescription at your pharmacy. Calcium carbonate gives you the largest percentage of usable calcium and should be taken with meals. Calcium citrate should be taken between meals for best absorption. There is no difference between most generic calcium supplements. TUMS or Viactiv Chews are both excellent methods of supplementation. For more information, see Calcium sources.

Herbal supplements:

We do not recommend any herbal supplements during the pregnancy. Most have not been studied so no safety record is available. If you are taking a supplement, please bring it to your appointment and discuss its use with your physician.