



Nutrition and Pregnancy

This article was originally published in the monthly Ask the Midwife column that appeared from 2003-2007 in the Willy Street Reader in Madison, WI. Ingrid Andersson, CNM, addressed questions related to health and nutrition in the childbearing year.

Question: Do you feel I can get everything I need for myself and my child just through my diet?

In a country where prenatal vitamins are standard, it might seem strange to question if you really need them. The whole subject of nutrition, what's good for you, what's bad for you, is a quagmire of conflicting research and recommendations. I think it always helps to consider where we've been, in order better to see where we're going.

My grandmother, and probably yours, apparently got everything she needed for herself and her babies through her diet. My grandmother ate meat from wild or pastured and well-cared-for animals. Her milk, cheese, and butter were full of flavor and fat. She ate fish my grandfather netted in a clean lake. She ate organic flax seeds, oats, and rye. Organic apples, plums, berries and vegetables were harvested in season and pickled or canned for winter. She was breastfed for more than a year. My grandmother was not "alternative" – she was normal.

Women in traditional societies around the world still get everything they need through their diets. When I returned from East Africa in 1995, an overweight American colleague who suffered from chronic migraines asked me if it had been hard to witness "the sickness and starvation over there." Actually, I said, I see more malnutrition and sickness here. The Masai, Kikuyu, and other rural women and children I talked to lived on diets of fresh local greens, grains, legumes, fruits, and animal foods. None of them had ever set foot in a supermarket.

From the cross-cultural work of early medical professionals and anthropologists, we know that the majority of pre-industrial women who ate local foods in their whole and unrefined states got everything they needed to produce healthy children, generation after generation. These women often appeared free of dental decay, heart disease, cancer, and other degenerative diseases. Along with their pre-industrial diet went periods of scarcity and intense physical activity, usually out of doors in fresh air. Every single person was breastfed, often for two or more years. Many societies deliberately practiced child-spacing of three years or so, allowing the mother to recover her nutrient stores and to ensure healthy subsequent children.

There is evidence that many societies offered special foods to women during pregnancy and lactation and to children during their growing years.. These foods included organ meats, shellfish, bright yellow "spring-time" butter, all extremely rich in the fat-soluble vitamins A and D, as well as protein. Meat and bone broths and grain, vegetable, and fruit beverages provided vitamin and mineral boosts. For children up to ages three or four, breast milk provided a perfect blend of the essential fatty acids and their derivatives, as well as antibodies, cholesterol, and hormones necessary for complete physiological development. These foods comprised the original Happy Meal.

In other words, the diets of many of our pre-industrial sisters possessed the equivalent Recommended Daily Allowances (RDAs) or higher of nutrients essential for humans. Nutrients were potentiated through sunlight and physical activity. Nutrients particularly important for pregnancy and lactation – omega 3 fatty acids, folic acid, protein, iron, calcium – were especially abundant and available.

Can we get what our grandmothers got through our diets today? If your diet is loaded with fresh, colorful, mostly organic, sometimes raw fruits, vegetables, whole grains, seeds, nuts, and legumes, if your sweeteners are primarily from mineral rich sources such as maple syrup, if the animal products you eat are mostly organic, wild caught or grassfed, and include fat (important as an antimicrobial and for fat-soluble nutrients), if you regularly spend time outdoors and most of all, if you feel capable and energetic, then you probably are getting what you need for a healthy pregnancy and lactation.

If, on the other hand, you wake up groggy and “hung-over,” longing to go back to sleep, if your moods go up and down throughout the day, if you experience strong cravings, compulsive eating, or insomnia, you may have dietary irregularities or deficiencies. Even if you prioritize your dollars on well sourced, optimal foods (assuming you have the dollars to prioritize), we know that animals fed commercial grains and processed-food by-products lack micro-nutrients that pastured and grass fed animals get. Soil depletion caused by modern agricultural practices, in turn yield depleted grains, legumes, fruits and vegetables. We know that refined carbohydrates and salt are stripped of nutrients and strip our bodies in turn of nutrient stores, setting in motion endless craving cycles. Fat-reduced foods are reduced in absorbable calcium and other nutrients. Rancid and man-made hydrogenated oils wreak havoc in cell metabolism.

Building on the empirical science of our ancestors and as well as modern science and fabulous local options such as Farmers' Markets, direct farm purchase and Community Supported Agriculture – healthful eating should be easier than ever. But we all know it's not. Eating is riddled with guilt and other emotions, with information overload, and with limitations of access.

High quality, whole food nutritional supplements are a fast and effective way of addressing real dietary needs. But nutritional, vitamin and herbal supplements are not regulated in the United States, so read labels and reviews, ask trusted sources for recommendations and consider making use of ConsumerLab.com, an independent research lab that tests, rates and reviews thousands of supplemental products.

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