



Nutrition and Pregnancy

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 and nutritional supplements have become dietary staples, it seems like heresy to question if you really need them. The subject of nutrition, what's good for you, what's bad for you, is a quagmire of conflicting research and recommendations. I think it helps to consider where we've been, in order better see where we're going.

My grandmother, and probably yours, got everything she needed for herself and her children 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 suffers 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 in Madison, Wisconsin. Apart from the obviously serious exceptions of AIDS and economic displacement, the Masai, Kikuyu, and other rural women and children I talked to thrived on diets of local grains, greens, fruits, and animal proteins and fats.

From the cross-cultural work of Dr. Weston Price and various anthropologists, we know that pre-industrial women who ate animal fats, meats, fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts, seeds, and grains in their whole and unrefined states got everything they needed to produce healthy children, generation after generation. Often, these women were free of dental decay, heart disease, cancer, and most other chronic illnesses. Along with their pre-industrial diet went periods of scarcity and daily physical activity – not athletic work-outs but steady, integrated movement, 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.

Most traditional societies did offer special foods to young men and women before conception, to women during pregnancy and lactation, and to children during their growing years. These foods included organ meats such as brain and liver, 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.

In short, 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.

So, can we get what our grandmothers got through our modern Madison diets? If you feel capable and energetic, if you regularly spend time outdoors, if your diet is loaded with fresh, colorful, mostly organic, sometimes raw fruits and vegetables, whole grains, seeds, nuts, and legumes, if your sweeteners are primarily from mineral rich sources such as molasses, and if the animal products you eat are mostly organic, grass-fed, and include fat (important as an antimicrobial and for fat-soluble nutrients), then I feel confident you are getting what you need to healthfully sustain 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. We know that animals fed commercial grains and processed food waste products lack the micronutrients our ancestors received in high amounts from pastured and grass fed animals. We can measure the soil depletion caused by modern agricultural practices of minerals and beneficial bacteria, in turn yielding depleted grains, legumes, fruits and vegetables. We know that refined carbohydrates and salt are not only stripped of nutrients but also tend to strip our bodies of nutrient stores and to set in motion endless craving cycles. Fat-reduced foods are also reduced in absorbable calcium and other nutrients. Rancid and man-made hydrogenated oils poison us by wreaking havoc in cell metabolism.

With the empirical science of our ancestors and modern biochemistry to build on – and rich local resources such as Willy Street Coop 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 availability due to lack of access, money, or time. High quality, whole food nutritional supplements are a fast and effective way of addressing real dietary needs.

However, supplemental treatment alone ignores the whole woman, indeed the whole food production system in which we all live and are more or less affected by. As a midwife, I encourage you to listen to your body as your oldest and wisest guide.

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This text was originally published in the Willy Street Co-op Reader in the **Ask the Midwife** column, where Ingrid Andersson of Community Midwives, LLC in Madison, answers questions on pregnancy, childbirth and related topics. More of these articles can be found at Ingrid’s website: www.gentlehomebirth.org