

## Fact Sheet

# Food safety during pregnancy – what foods should you avoid?

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Pregnancy is a good time to think about how healthy your diet is, and to consider some lifestyle changes, to make sure your baby gets the best start in life and you stay well during your pregnancy.

During pregnancy the hormones produced by your body affect your immune system making it harder to fight off certain illnesses. In addition, some foods can occasionally be harmful to your baby even though they may not make you very sick (or even sick at all).

This fact sheet is about foods which you should avoid, or limit, while you are pregnant. *[Please also see our other fact sheets on tips for healthy eating during pregnancy.]*

### Fish and seafood

Fish is high in protein, low in fat, and contains important minerals and vitamins like Vitamin B<sub>12</sub>. Fish is also a particularly good source of omega-3 fatty acids. These fats are important for healthy brain development in babies and children.

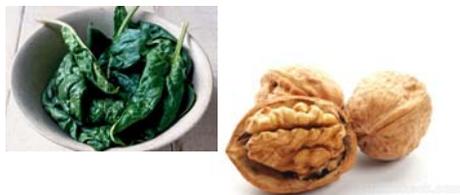
The fish which have the most omega-3 fatty acids are the oily fish like:

- Salmon
- Sardines
- Mackerel
- Tuna



If you are vegetarian, you can get omega -3 in smaller amounts from:

- Spinach
- Walnuts
- Soy
- Canola oil
- Flaxseed oil



Although we know it is important to get enough omega-3 during pregnancy and while you are breastfeeding, it is also important to be careful what type of fish you eat. Sea fish, particularly large sea fish, may have high levels of toxins like mercury, which can be harmful to babies' and children's developing brains.

The following table should make it easier for you to choose what fish to eat.

Fish portion intake recommended for:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pregnant women</li> <li>• breastfeeding women</li> <li>• women trying to fall pregnant</li> </ul>	A portion (serve) is 150 grams of fish.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• children up to 6 years old</li> </ul>	For children, a portion is 75 grams of fish.
Two to three serves of fish a week UNLESS it is a fish type listed below	
One serve a week of fish with slightly higher levels of mercury	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Orange Roughy (also called Sea Perch)</li> <li>• Catfish</li> </ul>
One serve a fortnight (once every two weeks) of fish which have higher mercury levels.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shark (also called Flake) or</li> <li>• Billfish (this includes Swordfish and Marlin)</li> </ul>
<b>If you are buying cooked 'fish and chips,' or eating at a restaurant, ask the shop what type of fish they use. The fish in 'fish and chips' is quite often Flake.</b>	

### What about canned tuna?

Most Australian canned tuna is a species tuna called 'skipjack' tuna which, because it is smaller, has lower levels of mercury.

When buying tuna (fresh or canned) check that it is not Yellowfin, Bluefin or White (albacore) tuna, as these larger tuna species contain higher levels of mercury.

### What about shellfish?

Avoid raw shellfish (mussels, scallops, oysters, clams etc) as they can cause food poisoning.

Shellfish that has been cooked is acceptable but only if eaten immediately while hot.

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### What about sushi?

The raw fish in sushi should be safe in pregnancy as long as it has been frozen before the sushi was made. Raw fish that has not been frozen may contain small parasites (worms) which can make you sick. For this reason you should avoid store bought sushi and not use any raw meat or seafood if you make your own sushi. Always eat sushi immediately and don't store in the fridge.

### Cheeses and pregnancy

Soft cheeses should be avoided in pregnancy because they increase your risk of catching a type of food poisoning called *Listeria*. Although *Listeria* usually only causes mild symptoms in adults (diarrhoea and flu-like illness) it can cause serious problems during pregnancy like miscarriage or stillbirth.

Soft cheeses to avoid include:

- Cheeses with white rind like brie, camembert and chèvre (goat cheese) which have been mould ripened.
- Blue veined cheeses like Danish blue, gorgonzola and Roquefort. Cooking these cheeses should destroy the *Listeria* bacteria but the cheese should still not be eaten unless it completely cooked and steaming hot all the way through.

Soft cheeses which can be eaten in pregnancy include:

- Cottage cheese
- Mozzarella
- Cream cheese
- Ricotta
- Haloumi
- Cheese spreads



Hard cheeses like cheddar, edam, parmesan etc. are considered to be safe to eat in pregnancy.

Remember that any cheese you eat, or milk you drink during in pregnancy, must be made from pasteurised milk.

### Paté and pregnancy

Avoid all patés while you are pregnant, even vegetarian ones, as they can cause *Listeria* infections.

### Eating eggs in pregnancy

Eggs (both the white and the yolk) should be well cooked. Also avoid home-made mayonnaise, aioli and uncooked batters which contain raw eggs. This is to protect you from *Salmonella* food poisoning which causes vomiting, diarrhoea, fevers and muscle aches.

Rarely *Salmonella* can cause miscarriage but it is not otherwise harmful to your pregnancy.

*Salmonella* can also be caught from eating raw or lightly cooked sprouts like alfalfa, snow pea and other sprouts.

### Eating meat and chicken in pregnancy

During pregnancy, you should particularly avoid eating undercooked steak, mince or chicken (it should not be pink). Undercooked meat may contain a parasite called *Toxoplasma*. This parasite only causes mild symptoms in adults but can seriously affect your baby causing miscarriage, stillbirth and birth defects, including problems like blindness and brain damage.

Other meats that may have *Toxoplasma* in them include 'cold cured meats' like pepperoni, salami and chorizo. These meats are not cooked but just fermented which does not kill the parasite. If you are planning to cook the pepperoni (like on a pizza) then it is okay to eat, but it must be hot and cooked through.

You should also avoid processed (deli) meats and chicken, unless you cook them and eat them immediately once cooked.

Fortunately *Toxoplasma* is rare in pregnancy. Another important way to prevent Toxoplasmosis is to avoid contact with cat poo (faeces). It is also not recommended to get a new cat (particularly a kitten) while you are pregnant. Always wash your hands after touching animals, particularly cats, and wear gloves when changing cat litter or gardening. Always wash dirt off any fruit and vegetables.

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### Eating liver in pregnancy

Avoid eating liver in pregnancy as it has very high Vitamin A levels which can be harmful.

### Eating milk and yogurt in pregnancy

Milk and yoghurt are safe in pregnancy and long as the milk is pasteurised and the yoghurt is also made from milk that has been pasteurised. UHT (Ultra Heat Treated) long life milk is also safe.

Soft serve and fried ice cream should be avoided.

### Eating nuts and peanuts in pregnancy

Eating nuts and peanuts (including peanut butter) in pregnancy is safe. There is no evidence that eating these while pregnant increases the risk of allergies (asthma, eczema or food allergies) for your baby. In fact, the risk of allergies may be lower for babies whose mothers do eat nuts during pregnancy. Further studies on this are still being done.

For a summary table of foods which are safe, and which should be avoided in pregnancy, see the [NSW Health webpage: Foods to avoid in pregnancy](#).

### Drinking coffee in pregnancy

Caffeine is found in coffee, tea, cola, energy drinks, chocolate and some medications like cold and flu tablets.



We do not know a lot about the effects of caffeine intake in pregnancy. Caffeine is a stimulant which means it increases your heart rate and can cause anxiety if too much is consumed). Large amounts of caffeine can also have a stimulant effect on your baby if you are pregnant or breast feeding.

Low doses of caffeine (< 200mg/day) do not increase the risk of miscarriage or affect the baby's birth weight. High doses of caffeine ( $\geq 300$ mg/day) may increase the risk of miscarriage and low birth weight babies. Caffeine is not known to cause birth defects or behavioural problems in children.

Drink (or food)	Serve (amount)	Caffeine content
Instant coffee	250 ml cup	80mg
Café cappuccino/latte	250 ml cup	250mg (varies)
Espresso	1 shot	200mg (varies)
Energy Drink	250 ml can	80mg
Cola	375 ml can	50mg
Iced coffee	500 ml bottle	30 – 200mg
Black tea	250 ml cup	100mg
Green tea	250 ml cup	50mg (can vary)
Milk chocolate	100 gram	20mg

To limit your caffeine intake try to replace drinks containing caffeine with water, milk or juice or try decaffeinated coffee and tea.

### What about breastfeeding?

Newborn babies cannot break down caffeine as quickly as adult so it is advisable to also keep your caffeine intake below 200mg while breastfeeding. Babies who get too much caffeine can become irritable and have difficulty settling to sleep.

**This information may make you concerned about the food you have eaten during pregnancy. However, be reassured that the actual chance of harm is low. Being sensible about always washing fruit and vegetables, and thoroughly cooking food, are the most important rules. There are only a few foods which should be avoided completely to ensure your safety and the safety of your baby (see table at the end of this sheet).**

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Illness (bacteria)	Adults symptoms	Problems for fetus/unborn baby	Foods to avoid
<i>Salmonella</i>	nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, fevers	rarely causes miscarriage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>raw eggs, undercooked meat and chicken</li> <li>all sprouts like alfalfa, clover, snowpea, soybean and others</li> </ul>
<i>Listeria</i> (Listeriosis)	mild gastro and flu like symptoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>miscarriage</li> <li>stillbirth</li> <li>pre-term birth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>avoid soft cheeses, unpasteurised milk, paté.</li> <li>eat freshly cooked food and washed fruit &amp; vegetables</li> <li>refrigerate food immediately and don't eat food after a day in the fridge</li> <li>avoid pre-made salads and sandwiches</li> </ul>
<i>Toxoplasma</i> (Toxoplasmosis)	very mild or no symptoms (flu-like)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>miscarriage</li> <li>stillbirth</li> <li>birth defects like blindness or brain problems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>avoid raw or undercooked meat</li> <li>avoid raw shellfish</li> <li>avoid unpasteurised milk</li> <li>wash all vegetables and fruit</li> <li>wash hands after contact with cats or soil eg. after gardening</li> <li>avoid contact with cat poo</li> <li>don't swallow river water if swimming</li> <li>drink bottled water if travelling overseas</li> </ul>

Please also read here the [advice from food safety NSW](#) about keeping food hot or cold and avoiding contact between raw and cooked foods. These are the golden rules of food safety.

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