

# 9052 - Foods to Avoid During Pregnancy



You want what's best for your baby. That's why you add sliced fruit to your fortified breakfast cereal, put extra veggies in your favorite recipes and eat yogurt for dessert. But do you know what foods to avoid during pregnancy?

## Avoid seafood high in mercury

Seafood can be a great source of protein and iron, and the omega-3 fatty acids in many fish can help promote your baby's brain development. In fact, research suggests that skimping on seafood during pregnancy may contribute to poor verbal skills, behavioral problems and other developmental issues during childhood. However, some fish and shellfish contain potentially dangerous levels of mercury. Too much mercury may damage your baby's developing nervous system.

The bigger and older the fish, the more mercury it may contain. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) encourage pregnant women to avoid swordfish, shark, king mackerel and tilefish, raw, undercooked or contaminated seafood.

So what's safe? Some types of seafood contain little mercury. Although concerns have been raised about the level of mercury in any type of canned tuna, the FDA and EPA say pregnant women can safely eat up to 12 ounces (340 grams) a week or two average-sized portions of shrimp, canned light tuna (limit albacore tuna and tuna steak to no more than 6 ounces or 170 grams a week), salmon, pollock, catfish and cod.

To avoid ingesting harmful bacteria or viruses:

- **Avoid raw fish and shellfish.** It's especially important to avoid oysters and clams.
- **Avoid refrigerated smoked seafood, such as lox.** It's OK to eat smoked seafood if it's an ingredient in a casserole or other cooked dish. Canned and shelf-stable versions also are safe.
- **Understand local fish advisories.** If you eat fish from local waters, pay attention to local fish advisories — especially if water pollution is a concern. Larger game fish contaminated with chemical pollutants may potentially harm a developing baby. If advice isn't available, limit the amount of fish from local waters you eat to 6 ounces (170 grams) a week and don't eat other fish that week.
- **Cook seafood properly.** Cook most fish to an internal temperature of 145 F (63 C). The fish is done when it separates into flakes and appears opaque throughout. Cook shrimp, lobster and scallops until they're milky white. Cook clams, mussels and oysters until their shells open. Discard any that don't open.

Avoid undercooked meat, poultry and eggs. During pregnancy, changes in your metabolism and circulation may increase the risk of bacterial food poisoning. Your reaction may be more severe than if you weren't pregnant. Rarely, your baby may get sick, too.

To prevent food-borne illness:

- **Fully cook all meats and poultry before eating.** Look for the juices to run clear, but use a meat thermometer to make sure.
- **Cook hot dogs and warm processed deli meats, such as bologna, until they're steaming hot — or avoid them completely.** They can be sources of a rare but potentially serious food-borne illness known as listeriosis.
- **Avoid refrigerated pates and meat spreads.** Canned and shelf-stable versions, however, are OK.



- **Don't buy raw poultry that's been pre-stuffed.** Raw juice that mixes with the stuffing can cause bacterial growth. Frozen poultry that's been pre-stuffed is safe when cooked from its frozen state.
- **Cook eggs until the egg yolks and whites are firm.** Raw eggs can be contaminated with the harmful bacteria salmonella. Avoid foods made with raw or partially cooked eggs, such as eggnog and hollandaise sauce.

### **Avoid unpasteurized foods**

Many low-fat dairy products — such as skim milk, mozzarella cheese and cottage cheese — can be a healthy part of your diet. But anything containing unpasteurized milk is a no-no. These products may lead to food-borne illness.

Unless these soft cheeses are clearly labeled as being made with pasteurized milk, don't eat brie, feta, camembert, blue cheese and Mexican-style cheeses, such as queso blanco, queso fresco and panela. Also, avoid drinking unpasteurized juice.

### **Avoid unwashed fruits and vegetables**

To eliminate any harmful bacteria, thoroughly wash all raw fruits and vegetables and cut away damaged portions. Avoid raw sprouts of any kind — including alfalfa, clover, radish and mung bean — which also may contain disease-causing bacteria.

### **Avoid large quantities of liver**

Liver is OK during pregnancy, but don't overdo it. Liver is high in vitamin A, and too much vitamin A may cause birth defects.

### **Avoid excess caffeine**

Caffeine can cross the placenta and affect your baby's heart rate. Some studies suggest that drinking too much caffeine may be associated with a small decrease in birth weight or an increased risk of miscarriage and stillbirth. In fact, a large 2008 study suggests that 200 milligrams (mg) of caffeine a day — about a 12-ounce cup (354 milliliters) of brewed coffee — during pregnancy may slow fetal growth.

Because of the potential effects on your developing baby, your health care provider may recommend limiting the amount of caffeine in your diet to less than 200 mg a day during pregnancy.

### **Avoid herbal tea**

Although herbal tea may be soothing, avoid it unless your health care provider says it's OK — even the types of herbal tea marketed specifically to pregnant women. There's little data on the effects of specific herbs on developing babies. And large amounts of some herbal teas, such as red raspberry leaf, may cause contractions.

### **Avoid alcohol**

One drink isn't likely to hurt your baby, but no level of alcohol has been proved safe during pregnancy. The safest bet is to avoid alcohol entirely.

Consider the risks. Mothers who drink alcohol have a higher risk of miscarriage and stillbirth. Too much alcohol during pregnancy may result in fetal alcohol syndrome, which can cause facial deformities, heart problems, low birth weight and mental retardation. Even moderate drinking can impact your baby's brain development.

If you're concerned because you drank alcohol before you knew you were pregnant or you think you need help to stop drinking, talk with your health care provider.

Reference: Mayo Clinic, 2009