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Foods to Avoid When Trying to Conceive

Just what's on the no-no list when it comes to eating while pregnant? **MH** finds out.

■ WORDS **JOANNA ONG**



Our experts Dr Ann Tan, OBGYN at Women Fertility & Fetal Centre in Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre, Dr Christopher Ng, OBGYN at GynaemD Women's & Rejuvenation Clinic at Camden Medical Centre and Wong Hui Xin, dietitian, Mount Elizabeth Novena Hospital have much to say about what goes into your mouth before and during pregnancy.

The Importance of Food Before and During Pregnancy

Dr Tan emphasises that we are what we eat and drink. If we want to have healthy children, we need to first and foremost be healthy parents-to-be so that our eggs and sperm are the healthiest at the time of conception. If this is the premise for preparing oneself for pregnancy, most of us will then take more pains to examine what we eat in preparation for conception.

Wong adds that the "Fertility Diet" study published by a team of Harvard

researchers in 2007 has shown that women following the "fertility diet" had 66 per cent lower risk of ovulatory infertility.

They chose lower trans-fat and more monounsaturated fat (from foods such as avocado, olive oil), more vegetable protein (instead of animal protein), more fiber, low glycemic index (GI) carbohydrate foods (including whole grains), more vegetarian sources of iron (instead of meat sources) and high fat dairy (instead of low fat dairy).

In general, eating more vegetables, eating more monounsaturated fat

instead of trans-fat and saturated fat, making at least half of your grains whole and getting enough calcium intake including dairy will help to meet your nutritional needs and promote healthy weight in order to prepare you for successful conception.

Dr Ng also advises women to take multivitamin supplements and folate before they conceive and during pregnancy. In the case of folic acid, it is recommended to take it at least one month before conception and for the first three months of the pregnancy as it has been shown to reduce the risk of neural tube defects. The advice for folate is that women should consume at least 400 micrograms of folic acid a day for a minimum of one month before conception and they should continue to do so for the first three months into their pregnancy. Foods high in folate include broccoli, asparagus, spinach, black-eyed peas, lentils, kidney beans, avocado, beetroot, parsley, wheat germ, bran, wholemeal flour and peanuts.

Say No to These!

Food safety is very important during pregnancy as bacterial toxins and harmful chemicals such as alcohol and methylmercury can be passed from mother to baby, leading to undesirable outcomes, cautions Wong. Some of the foods to avoid before and during pregnancy are:

High mercury fishes

Mercury is an environmental contaminant that can impact foetal growth and the developing brain. You should avoid taking big fishes (such as tilefish, king mackerel, shark and swordfish) that contain high levels of mercury during pregnancy. Limit all other fish (including tuna) and shellfish to 12oz (360g) or less per week.

Unpasteurised milk, soft cheese, liver pates, uncooked hot dogs, ham and luncheon meat



These foods are prone to bacteria called *Listeria Monocytogenes* that cause listeriosis which may result in miscarriages and stillbirth.

Raw or undercooked meat, poultry, seafood and raw or half-boiled eggs

These foods contain a variety of food-borne bacteria and viruses. You are at increased risk of bacterial poisoning during pregnancy due to the changes in your metabolism and your reaction may be more severe than when you are not pregnant.



Unwashed vegetables

Unwashed salad may be contaminated with bacteria from soil whereas raw vegetable sprouts including alfalfa, clover, radish and mung beans have high levels of germs which can be detrimental to your health.



Alcohol

Drinking alcohol during pregnancy increases the risk of miscarriage and stillbirth. Excessive alcohol intake may even result in foetal alcohol syndrome including physical deformities, cognitive disabilities as well as social and behavioural issues.

Excessive caffeine intake

Recent studies have shown that consuming more than 300mg of caffeine a day will increase the risk of miscarriage. Limit your intake of caffeinated drinks to no more than two cups per day.

All these foods are supposed to be avoided throughout the entire pregnancy. But you may start doing so before pregnancy as many women only realise that they're pregnant when they are four weeks or above.

Dr Ng adds that if you have to have your sushi fix then choose a clean restaurant after 12 weeks as the risk of miscarriage is lower then and all the baby's organs would have developed by then so the risk of congenital

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abnormality is lower. But if you want to be 100 per cent safe then avoid it completely. Most importantly have a healthy and well-balanced diet. As long as the food is properly cooked and prepared, it is fine.

What Should I do if I Have Taken These Foods?

Are there symptoms to look out for? Are there any foods or medications to counter its effects? If you don't develop any adverse symptoms e.g. fever, abdominal cramps and diarrhoea, you do not have to be excessively concerned, Dr Tan counsels. However, to play it safe, Dr Ng advises that it is best to contact your gynaecologist as soon as possible who can then advise you appropriately. Serial ultrasound scans can be performed to ensure viability, to track the growth in order to detect any growth retardation and to screen for any structural abnormalities. In any case, watch out for the symptoms of food poisoning. Unfortunately, there are also no foods or medications that can counter the adverse effects of these forbidden foods. Hence, it is best to avoid these foods while pregnant to ensure a healthy baby, Wong says. ■