



Eating and Breastfeeding

There are loads of ideas in circulation about what you should and shouldn't eat while breastfeeding. The good news is most of them are myths. So you don't have to consume Guinness or Mars bars (unless you want to!). And you don't have to give up oranges, blackcurrants, curry, chocolate or onions. Here are answers to the questions I most often get asked about eating and breastfeeding.

Do I need to eat more when breastfeeding?

You will probably find you do eat more, but you don't need to 'eat for two' any more than you do when you are pregnant. Simply eating to satisfy your appetite will ensure you get enough food.

Do I need to eat healthily?

Women often worry that if they don't eat the right foods or enough food their milk will be insufficient or inferior. In fact, unless you are severely malnourished, your body will make enough nutritious milk for your baby. However, looking after a small baby is a demanding job and you need to look after yourself by eating well. This means eating a balanced diet with five servings of fruit and vegetables a day, and not eating too many fat or sweet foods. But it doesn't have to be boring or difficult to prepare.

In the chaos of early parenthood there may not always be time to prepare meals, so make sure you have plenty of nourishing snacks – things you can grab when you need a bite, rather than putting off making a meal until you have time. By then you may be feeling too hungry and tired to make the effort. If your visitors want to help, you could encourage them to arrive with food – a casserole or a homemade fruit cake for instance, or prepare some food while they are with you.

I've heard you need to drink plenty of water?

You will find that you are more thirsty while breastfeeding, but there is no need to drink more than you need to satisfy your thirst.

In fact, if you drink excessive amounts of water it may slightly depress your milk supply. Women often find that when they start a breastfeed they suddenly feel thirsty. So it can be helpful to remember to set yourself up with a drink first.

So what can't you eat?

Despite all the old wives' tales, there really are no particular foods that you need to avoid when breastfeeding. All the foods that are 'banned' during pregnancy – paté, soft cheeses, runny eggs – are fine when breastfeeding.

The Department of Health recommends that breastfeeding women avoid eating peanuts if any close relatives of the baby suffer from allergies. This is a precautionary advice, as at present we do not know how much the chance of your baby getting peanut allergy is increased, if at all, by eating peanuts while breastfeeding. They also recommend limiting the amount of tuna eaten, because of the risks of mercury contamination – not more than one fresh steak or two medium cans per week. For the same reason, avoid eating shark, marlin or swordfish.

It may be a good idea not to change your diet radically soon after birth. One study found that mothers who had changed their diet reported that their babies were more fussy and difficult to breastfeed compared to mothers who had kept to the same diet.

What about alcohol?

Moderate drinking is fine – a glass of wine with a meal, for example. Any alcohol you drink will pass into the breast milk and so to the baby. However, the amounts the baby gets if you drink moderately will be extremely small – much less than passes to the baby in the uterus during pregnancy.

And coffee?

Most people find that moderate consumption of coffee and tea is fine (less than five cups a day).

But my friend couldn't eat mushrooms!

Well, some people do find that one or two particular foodstuffs do upset their baby, but these effects seem to be very individual. Just because mushrooms upset your friend's baby, it doesn't mean that they will upset yours. Rather than assuming you too should avoid mushrooms, you may do better to wait and see if anything upsets your baby – probably nothing will!

Also it is often hard to tell if a particular food stuff is causing a problem. Remembering what you ate when, and if it caused a problem twelve or so hours later (and whether it did the same thing last time), is not easy if you last had a full night's sleep a couple of months ago! If you do begin to suspect that something you are eating is causing problems, it could be helpful to talk it through with your health visitor or a breastfeeding counsellor, before you try changing your diet.

Can I go on a diet while breastfeeding?

Many women find that breastfeeding alone helps them lose weight, so you may not need to. Others find that while they don't lose weight during breastfeeding, they do when they stop. However if you do want to diet, it is important not to go on a crash diet – you will feel very run down. Also a crash diet will force your body to use up long stored reserves of fat; toxins stored in these fats will be released into your bloodstream and so into your milk.

Once breastfeeding is established, it is possible to maintain a gradual weight-reducing diet – your health visitor should be able to help you plan this. It may be that weight gain and your eating pattern have been an issue for some time. You may find it helpful to talk to your health visitor or GP about developing healthier eating patterns. In the long run this will also help your baby – the best way to teach children good eating habits is by example!

Will breastfeeding take calcium from my bones?

While you are breastfeeding your body needs more calcium. It used to be thought that this meant that unless you ate loads of calcium-rich foods, your bones would suffer. Now we know that the story is more complex. Whatever your diet, your bones will be slightly depleted of calcium while you breastfeed, however during the months after stopping feeding your body will replace the calcium in your bones and will make them slightly stronger than before. This is why women who breastfeed have a slightly lower risk of osteoporosis than women who don't. During breastfeeding your body becomes extra efficient at extracting calcium from your food, so eating a healthy diet should be sufficient to ensure your body has as much calcium as it needs.

If you want to talk about breastfeeding...

The NCT Breastfeeding Line 0870 444 8708