

Plant-Based Pregnancy

Nutritional Considerations



Pregnancy is a unique stage in life that brings increased nutritional needs. A well-planned, whole food, plant-based diet is not only safe during pregnancy and lactation—it is entirely appropriate and can provide all the nutrients needed for a healthy pregnancy. This position is supported by the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, the world’s largest organization of nutrition professionals. Yet despite this, many healthcare providers remain unaware or uncertain about the viability of plant-based diets during this life stage.

As with any eating pattern during pregnancy, success depends on thoughtful planning to ensure all nutrient needs are met. Plant-based diets rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds are associated with reduced risk of gestational diabetes, healthy weight gain, and lower rates of preeclampsia and constipation. Plant-based diets are also naturally high in fiber, antioxidants, and phytonutrients that support overall well-being.

NUTRITION

As the body undergoes progressive changes to support pregnancy, it’s important to understand how nutritional needs evolve throughout each trimester. The following sections outline increased dietary requirements, key nutrients to consider, and practical snack ideas to support a healthy pregnancy.

Caloric Needs

As the body adapts to support a growing baby, energy needs naturally increase—especially in the second and third trimesters. However, pregnancy is not a time for “eating for two” in the way it’s often portrayed. Instead, it’s about eating smarter: focusing on quality, nutrient-dense calories that fuel both maternal health and fetal development.

According to the 2020–2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, average caloric needs increase as follows:

First Trimester - No additional calories are typically needed beyond baseline needs, which is generally recommended to be 1600-1800 calories per day. Focus on nutrient-rich foods to support early fetal development.

Second Trimester- An additional ~340 calories per day is recommended.

Third Trimester - An additional ~450 calories per day is recommended.

These are general guidelines and may vary depending on pre-pregnancy weight, activity level, metabolism, and whether the individual is carrying multiples.

Protein

Protein is vital during pregnancy to support the development of fetal tissues—especially the brain—and to maintain the growth and function of maternal tissues, including the uterus, breasts, and expanding blood supply.

First Trimester

Recommended Intake: ~46 grams/day

During the first trimester, protein needs remain close to pre-pregnancy levels, as fetal growth is just beginning. However, adequate intake of high-quality protein is still essential to support early cell division, organ formation, and placental development.

Second and Third Trimester

Recommended Intake: ~71 grams/day

Protein needs increase significantly in the second trimester to support rapid fetal growth, maternal tissue expansion (such as the uterus and breast tissue), and the production of amniotic fluid. Meeting these needs is crucial for a healthy pregnancy trajectory.

A well-planned, plant-based diet can easily meet protein needs through a variety of whole foods. All plants contain protein and the essential amino acids. Consuming a variety of plants combined with higher protein plant sources throughout the day ensures the body receives all essential amino acids. Excellent sources include:

- Legumes (lentils, chickpeas, black beans)
- Soy foods (tofu, tempeh, edamame, soy milk)
- Whole grains (quinoa, oats, brown rice)
- Nuts and nut butters
- Seeds (hemp, chia, pumpkin, sunflower)

Iron

Iron needs increase significantly during pregnancy due to greater blood volume and fetal development. The recommended intake is 27 mg per day. Iron-rich plant foods include lentils, beans, tofu, pumpkin seeds, and leafy greens. Eating these foods with vitamin C-rich produce like bell peppers or citrus can help to enhance iron absorption.

Calcium

Calcium supports the development of the baby's bones, teeth, muscles, and nerves. Pregnant women need around 1,000 mg of calcium per day. Good sources include fortified plant milks or juices, tofu, almonds, tahini, beans, and leafy greens like kale and bok choy.

Vitamin B12

Vitamin B12 is essential for the development of your baby's brain and nervous system, as well as for the production of healthy red blood cells. This important vitamin is made by bacteria and is not naturally found in most plant foods. Because modern food production methods limit our exposure to naturally occurring B12, supplementation is a safe and reliable way to ensure adequate intake—especially during pregnancy, when needs are higher.

Be sure your prenatal vitamin includes vitamin B12—commonly in the form of methylcobalamin or cyanocobalamin. Depending on your levels and overall intake, your healthcare provider may recommend an additional supplement to support a healthy pregnancy.

Vitamin D

Vitamin D plays a critical role in calcium absorption, bone development, and immune function—for both the developing fetus and the pregnant individual. Adequate levels are also associated with reduced risk of complications such as gestational diabetes, pre-eclampsia, and low birth weight. The recommended intake during pregnancy is 600 IU per day.

While sunlight exposure triggers natural vitamin D synthesis in the skin, factors like skin pigmentation, sunscreen use, geographic location, and time spent indoors can limit this production—making supplementation a safe and effective option for many. Because individual needs can vary, it's important to consult your healthcare provider before starting any vitamin D supplement.

Omega-3 Fatty Acids (Especially DHA)

DHA (docosahexaenoic acid) is a type of omega-3 fat that is crucial for your baby's brain, eye, and nervous system development, especially during the second and third trimesters when brain growth accelerates.

Your body can make DHA from ALA (alpha-linolenic acid), which is found in:

- Ground flaxseeds
- Chia seeds
- Walnuts
- Hemp seeds

However, the conversion of ALA to DHA is low. The recommended amount of ALA per day is 1.4 milligrams during pregnancy. You can easily get this from the foods listed above.

Microalgae-based DHA and EPA supplements are also available. Discuss with your health care provider whether a DHA and EPA supplement is necessary.

Folate

Folate is vital for early fetal development, especially in preventing neural tube defects like spina bifida or anencephaly. The recommended intake during pregnancy is 600 mcg per day. Folate is abundant in whole plant foods. Excellent sources include:

- Dark leafy greens (spinach, kale, collards)
- Legumes (lentils, chickpeas, black beans)
- Avocados
- Beets
- Asparagus
- Oranges and citrus fruits
- Brussels sprouts and broccoli

Plant-based eaters often have higher dietary folate intake than omnivores due to the naturally folate-rich nature of their diets.

Sample One-Day Plant-Based Meal Plan

This sample one-day plan offers not just protein, but a wealth of iron, folate, fiber, calcium, omega-3s, and antioxidants—key nutrients for a healthy plant-based pregnancy.

Breakfast

Tofu Scramble with Veggies & Whole Grain Toast

½ block (about 150g) firm tofu – 21g protein
1 cup sautéed spinach, peppers, and mushrooms – 2g protein
2 slices whole grain toast – 6g protein
1 tbsp almond butter – 3g protein
Subtotal: 32g protein



Morning Snack

Chia Pudding with Berries

3 tbsp chia seeds – 9g protein
1 cup fortified soy milk – 8g protein
½ cup blueberries – 0.5g protein
Subtotal: 17.5g protein

Lunch

Quinoa Chickpea Salad

¾ cup cooked quinoa – 6g protein
½ cup chickpeas – 7g protein
Mixed greens, cherry tomatoes, cucumber – 2g protein
2 tbsp tahini-lemon dressing – 5g protein
Subtotal: 20g protein



Afternoon Snack

Banana + Handful of Almonds

1 medium banana – 1g protein
¼ cup almonds – 7g protein
Subtotal: 8g protein

Dinner

Lentil & Sweet Potato Stew with Brown Rice



1 cup cooked lentils – 18g protein
½ cup cooked brown rice – 3g protein
Sweet potatoes, carrots, kale – 3g protein
Subtotal: 24g protein

Evening Snack (Optional)

Hummus & Whole Grain Crackers

¼ cup hummus – 5g protein
6 whole grain crackers – 2g protein
Subtotal: 7g protein

Daily Total: ~108g protein

SNACK IDEAS

Nutritious snacks can help meet increased energy and protein needs, especially during the second and third trimesters when appetite and nutritional needs increase. Choose snacks that combine protein, healthy fats, and fiber to support satiety, blood sugar balance, and overall wellness.

Recommended snack ideas include:

- Roasted chickpeas or edamame
- Smoothies made with soy milk, nut butter, fruits, and chia or hemp seeds
- Whole grains crackers with hummus or avocado
- Overnight oats with fortified plant milk, peanut butter, and berries
- Tofu or tempeh lettuce wraps
- Chia pudding topped with fruit and almonds
- Bean and vegetable quesadillas made with whole grain tortillas
- Trail mix with nuts, seeds, and dried fruit
- Nut butter on whole grain toast with banana slices
- Lentil or split pea soup with whole grain toast

Thriving Through Pregnancy with the Power of Plants

A thoughtfully planned, whole food, plant-based diet can fully support a healthy pregnancy while offering powerful long-term benefits for both parent and child. By emphasizing a wide variety of nutrient-dense plant foods with supportive

supplementation,, expectant mothers can meet all their nutritional needs while dramatically reducing the risk of common pregnancy complications. This evidence-based approach not only nurtures optimal fetal development but also lays the foundation for a lifetime of health.

Epigenetics and Pregnancy

Nutrition during pregnancy does more than support fetal growth—it helps shape the long-term health of the child through epigenetic mechanisms. Epigenetics refers to how lifestyle factors, like diet, influence gene expression without changing the DNA itself. Whole plant-based diets, rich in leafy greens, legumes, cruciferous vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and nuts, provide key nutrients such as folate and choline that support healthy DNA methylation, a crucial epigenetic process. Research has shown that maternal adherence to a plant-based diet may lower the child's risk for chronic diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease by establishing a more protective epigenetic profile. Including a variety of nutrient-dense plant foods during pregnancy can be a practical and evidence-based strategy for promoting lifelong health in the next generation and beyond..

Authored By: Rebecca Rohe, RD Candidate & The Plantrician Project

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