

No Food, Please

Dealing with a loss of appetite during pregnancy is more common than you think. Here's how to ensure you're meeting your nutritional needs even when you're not up for a meal.

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It seems logical to expect that an appetite change during pregnancy means an increase in appetite; after all, you're now eating for two, right? Not always!

In fact, appetite loss is more common than you think, and this can be especially trying at a time when it seems like well-intentioned family has taken it upon themselves to force-feed

you with every health food known to man. If eating is beginning to become a struggle, our experts chip in to help you understand what's happening, how it affects your nutritional needs, and how you can help yourself.

What Causes Appetite Loss?

"A loss of appetite could be a result of morning sickness which is usually

more pronounced in the first trimester," explains Jaclyn Reutens, dietitian at Aptima Nutrition & Sports Consultants. "Although the name suggests that nausea and vomiting happen only in the morning, it can actually last the whole day, and some women experience this for the entire pregnancy."

Professor Tan Thiam Chye, head and senior consultant of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at KK Women's and Children's hospital identifies human chorionic gonadotropin (HCG), a pregnancy hormone which peaks at week 10 to 12 of pregnancy, as the cause of morning sickness.

If your appetite loss is mild, Prof Tan says there's not much to worry about. "In most cases, [appetite loss] does not harm the developing baby, even when weight is lost in the first few months of the pregnancy. At this stage, the placenta is not formed yet and the baby does not take in nutrients from the mother, yet. The symptoms will usually resolve naturally after the first trimester."

While a bit of weight loss early on is not the end of the world, it is important that you get adequate nutrition throughout your pregnancy.

Is Morning Sickness Preventable?

Morning sickness isn't really preventable, but Prof Tan explains that there are a few things you can do to help reduce its severity:

- 1. Get adequate hydration by taking small sips of water (about 30ml hourly) or taking small amounts

of isotonic drinks, coconut water or any other fluids containing electrolytes.

- 2. Consume small frequent meals of dry or easily digestible foods like porridge, dry crackers or toast.
- 3. Avoid lying down after food. Also, use an extra pillow during sleep to prevent heartburn.
- 4. Check your environment to minimise the stimuli for nausea: remove sources of strong odours such as essential oils or perfumes.

Prof Tan's advice is that if these don't help, see a doctor for anti-emetic treatment that can reduce the symptoms of nausea and vomiting. If your morning sickness is severe, your doctor will tell you if you need to be hospitalised for intravenous fluids and electrolyte replacement, says Prof Tan.

Reutens agrees and adds that it might also help to limit oily and fatty foods. "They take a longer time to digest so chances of you hurling it are higher," she says.

Getting the Right Nutrition

Wondering if you're eating the right foods or if you're eating enough during pregnancy is a concern of many first time mums. According to Ho Pey Ying, dietician at KKH, your nutritional needs now do not differ much from before you were pregnant, because, "the body's efficiency for absorption of some nutrients is enhanced during pregnancy."

"Nevertheless, to support the growth of the developing foetus, additional energy is required from

the second trimester onwards. Extra energy needs can be met by ensuring that the three main meals are taken and adding one or two snacks, including at least two servings of dairy or dairy alternatives daily," adds Ho.

Reutens gives us a list of daily, medically-recommended food types and quantities:

Recommended servings per day

- ⑦ Rice and alternatives: 6 to 7 servings. One serving is a ½ bowl of rice, 2 slices of bread, a ½ bowl of noodles, 40g cereal or 4 whole-wheat biscuits.
- ⑦ Vegetables: 3 servings. One serving is a ¾ cup of cooked vegetables, 150g of raw leafy vegetables or 100g raw, non-leafy vegetables.
- ⑦ Fruits: 2 servings. One serving is 1 small apple or orange (~130g), 1 wedge of honeydew or watermelon (~130g), or 10 grapes (~50g).
- ⑦ Meat and alternatives including 1 serving of dairy: 3.5 servings. Examples of one serving are 1 palm size of meat, chicken or fish, 170g of beancurd, a ¾ cup of cooked lentils or 500ml of low-fat milk.

If you're vegetarian or vegan, fret not, Ho says that your protein needs can still be met with high-protein meat substitutes. "The recommended serving for a pregnant woman is 2.5 servings of meat or alternatives per day. A

serving of meat alternatives is, for example, ¼ to 1 cup of cooked pulses or beans, two small blocks of soft beancurd, one large cake of tau kwa, two pieces of tempeh or one cup of mixed nuts. For lacto-ovo vegetarians, you can also include three egg whites or two glasses of milk as one serving of a meat alternative," she says.

For vegan mothers, Reutens has concerns; "For vegans, it is more challenging as the only sources of protein would be tofu, soy milk, beans, legumes, nuts, seeds and nut butter. You would have to ensure there are protein foods in all meals and snacks," she says. Also, she adds that if your obstetrician advises that your nutritional intake is insufficient for the growing baby, it might be worth considering including other animal-derived proteins, just for the duration of your pregnancy.

Reutens further cautions that vegetarian and vegan mothers should pay special attention to their iron, calcium and vitamin D intakes, all of which can be also easily obtained through supplement additions.

Milk for Mums

If your loss of appetite is getting to you and you don't seem to be able to stomach most of the items on the menu, try drinking some maternal milk – specially formulated milk for expectant mums. While you may not be able to meet all your nutritional needs through your meals, maternal milk gives you a

A word of advice
If morning sickness is getting you down, try and fight it by consuming small frequent meals of dry or easily digestible foods like porridge, dry crackers or toast.

hand as it is usually packed with all the important nutrients your body needs during your pregnancy and even while you're breastfeeding.

Not quite sure if you can stomach it? Try asking your gynaecologist and the clinic may be able to pass you a sample or two.



Putting on the Right Amount of Weight

Weight gain is inevitable during pregnancy and even though your mind rationalises it as necessary to growing a human being inside you, it can still be, emotionally, a frustrating and unhappy process. That said, weight gain is also a marker of getting enough nutrition and the best thing you can do is to try to limit your weight gain to just the right amount prescribed by your doctor.

In order to keep your weight gain within the healthy range, Reuters advises the following: "Quality is more important than quantity as you now know that eating for two is not doubling the quantity. Put a stop or a limit to junk food and focus on more nutrient dense foods such as wholegrains, fresh fruit, vegetables and lean meat. See a dietitian if you struggle with the changes."

Do note that there are risks to not gaining enough weight as mothers who gain too little during pregnancy risk having premature babies and babies that are small for gestational weight.

If you're eating healthy but don't seem to be putting on weight, you're either not eating enough or you're among the very rare few. "These mums have to consciously eat more. Some women just have small appetites throughout their lives and their idea of a large meal could be in fact a small meal. You should follow a prescribed meal plan by a dietitian to ensure you are getting what you need to gain weight", says Reuters. 