

What Not to Eat During Pregnancy

Here are the food and drinks you need to ditch now that you're expecting.

WORDS **CHRISTEL GERALYN GOMES**



Now that you're pregnant, eating well has become a "must" instead of a "should". The importance of getting the right nutrition, along with avoiding foods that pose a risk to your health or your baby's, cannot be overstated. Read on for what our experts say are foods you'd better avoid, and why.

Meats

Raw or partially cooked meats and seafood

According to Ho Pey Ying, dietitian at KK Women's and Children's hospital, consuming meats raw is risky as they can be contaminated with bacteria that can cause food poisoning and lead to miscarriages and stillbirths.

Dr Lim Min Yu, consultant at NUH Women's Centre adds that besides raw meats and seafood, caution should also be extended to partially cooked food. "Uncooked food can harbour dangerous bacteria, as the recent issue with raw fish sold in hawker centres leading to fatalities from GBS has illustrated. If you like to eat sushi, those that are fully cooked are safer – for example, tamago (egg), cucumber, fully cooked unagi (eel) or prawn (ebi)."

Partially cooked eggs

Uncooked or semi-cooked eggs also pose a bacteria threat. Scrambled, sunny side up, poached and half-boiled eggs are all ways of partially cooking eggs. Salmonella, bacteria



found in eggs that aren't fully cooked, can cause food poisoning, dehydration, preterm delivery, low birth rate and miscarriages. To be sure, always request that your eggs are fully cooked when ordering meals outside.

Deli meats and pates (including vegetable pates)

Deli meats like ham, cold cuts, luncheon meat and spam or pates can also be contaminated with listeria – causing food poisoning and leading to miscarriages and stillbirths – says Ho.

"Listeria has the ability to cross the placenta and infect the baby," adds Jaclyn Reutens, dietitian at Aptima Nutrition & Sports Consultants. "These meats are also low in nutritional value. They are highly processed with a high sodium content and should be avoided during pregnancy anyway," she adds.

If deli meats must be a part of your diet, our experts agree that reheating your meats until they are steaming (75°C) will kill bacteria in the event that it is present.

Liver

Liver, specifically, is one organ that makes its way to the list of meats you should avoid. "It contains a large amount of Vitamin A, which can be harmful to the developing foetus," says Dr Lim.

Ho agrees, adding: "Liver is a concentrated source of vitamin A, providing more than four times the recommended intake during the critical period of embryonic development. This can increase the risk of cleft lip, cleft palate and other malformations. Hence, it is recommended to limit intake of liver to two tablespoons (50g) once a week during the first trimester of pregnancy."

Fish

While raw fish should be avoided completely, certain kinds of cooked fish should be avoided or restricted for other reasons: "Tuna has a higher content of mercury than other fish, therefore one should restrict tuna intake during pregnancy," says Dr Lim. Mercury is a heavy metal which is toxic



to the foetus's neurological system, especially while it rapidly develops.

Ho lists other large, deep-sea fishes that also contain significant amounts of methylmercury:

"Swordfish, King Mackerel, Shark, Tilefish, Marlin, Catfish and Pollock".

Cheese and Unpasteurised Dairy

The bacteria, *listeria* – which can cause food poisoning and lead to miscarriages and stillbirths – does not limit itself to meats but is also found in soft and blue-veined cheeses, as well as unpasteurised dairy.

Soft cheeses

"Soft cheeses with a white rind, like Brie and Camembert, as well as soft blue cheeses, like Danish Blue contain more moisture than hard cheeses. This makes it more likely for bacteria to grow in them," explains Dr Lim.

Pasturised soft cheeses are safer than unpasturised ones, "as long as they are not kept out in the open for too long," says Reutens.

If you're stricken with a cheese craving but want to be extremely safe, not to worry, processed hard cheeses are perfectly safe to consume, adds Ho.



Milk

Milk-drinkers also should ensure that all dairy consumed during pregnancy is pasteurised. Pasteurisation is simply a partial sterilisation process, which involves heating the milk to kill most bacteria and harmful microorganisms. Consuming unpasteurised milk or yoghurt and cheese products made from unpasteurised milk puts you at risk of a *listeria* infection.

Salads

Raw, unwashed salads are more likely to be contaminated with bacteria from the soil, says Ho. To be very safe, prepare your salads at home and ensure that you wash all raw leaves and vegetables thoroughly. "Care should be taken as pregnant women are more susceptible to food poisoning," says Ho.

Homemade Mayonnaise

Generally, avoid potato salad and coleslaw in restaurants or when visiting friends unless you are sure the mayonnaise used has come out of a bottle. Mayonnaise can be made in homes and restaurants with raw or partially cooked eggs, which pose a salmonella threat. "If the salad is made with bottled mayonnaise, it should be safe," says Ho.



A word of advice

Liver contains large amounts of Vitamin A and should be avoided during pregnancy as it can harm your developing foetus.

Unpasteurised Juice

You can forgive yourself if you weren't even aware that unpasteurised juice existed – most people don't! What is unpasteurised juice anyway?

Simply put, all freshly made juice at roadside stalls, food courts, hawker centres or at home is unpasteurised, and some pre-packaged juices also fall into that category.

E. coli is something that may be present in fresh juices, says Reuters.

Ho adds that bacteria and parasites come from the raw fruit and vegetables used to make the juice, and these can cause food poisoning which women are more susceptible to while pregnant. "It is recommended to choose packaged pasteurised juices instead," says Ho.

Coffee

"It is best to avoid caffeine totally as it is a stimulant which can increase your heart rate and metabolism. This, in turn, may add stress to your baby and increase your risk of miscarriage. If you really need your daily dose of caffeine, limit it to 300mg a day (equivalent to two cups of coffee



or tea). Bear in mind that cola drinks, chocolate and chocolate beverages also contain small amounts of caffeine, so take these into account and consume in moderation," says Ho.

Herbal Products

Ho's advice is to also avoid taking any herbal products, as "there aren't enough conclusive studies to make recommendations for consuming or using herbal products during pregnancy."

Reuters adds that the caution against herbal products extends to teas – "Be careful of herbal teas as they are not regulated by FDA or HSA. The safer teas would be peppermint, chamomile, ginger, lemon, raspberry leaf and rooibos." 

