

Nutrition and Childbearing

The diversity of eating styles throughout history is enormous. Every culture has specific foods available according to the climate and soil. Climate plays the greatest role in food selection; colder climates include more fat rich foods to the daily diet and warmer climates more watery or cooling foods. Beyond these environmental factors, every culture has specific food beliefs that have evolved over generations of trial and error, personal tastes and long-term outcome in the form of community wellness.

Obviously, women have been having babies within this diversity throughout human history and thus we have a historical perspective of diet and childbearing outcome from which we might draw insight as to ideal nutrition. Cultures that have shown the strongest pregnancies, most uncomplicated births, easiest post-partums and greatest maternal and infant survival rates have several common dietary elements.

Grains: 4-8 Servings Daily in Whole Form
Legumes: At Least 1 Serving Daily in Various Preparations
Nuts and Seeds: At Least ½ Cup Daily
Oils and Fats: 2 Tablespoons From Plant Sources

Grains, legumes, nuts and seeds all shared a common place in the dietary belief system of traditional cultures; each grew freely and in abundance, each stored the kernel of life within, and each dried and stored with incredible ease and resilience. Legumes, nuts and seeds also produced oils of remarkable taste and obvious health use. These common factors made grains, legumes, nuts and seeds important food within traditional cultures, and the primary foods for the childbearing year.

Whole, unprocessed grains were eaten steamed or in soups. Breads, usually flat breads prepared without yeast, were made and eaten in the same day from whole grains which were ground just before preparation. Legumes were often combined with grains as a whole food, but were also mashed into pastes and sauces or dried and ground into flour for breads. Nuts and seeds, also added to grain dishes, were freely eaten out of hand. Ground nut pastes and oils were used liberally during pregnancy.

Vegetables: 4-8 Servings Daily of Seasonally Available
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While almost all cultures cultivated some of their vegetables, many were harvested as wild food. Traditional cultures recognized that plants that chose their environment were far stronger than those that were cultivated. This mimicry of pregnancy made wild harvested vegetables a preferred choice in pregnancy, although all traditional cultures encouraged childbearing women to eat large quantities of whatever forms of vegetables were available.

Fruit: Eaten Only In Season From Local Sources
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Fruits and berries formed a seasonal addition to traditional diets. Eaten during the peak of the season, this food group was recognized as a quick energy source and a prized celebration food. Only rarely stored as a whole food, fruits and berries were often stored as wine for use as medicine and a celebration drink. In any form, this group was not eaten in any significant amount during pregnancy in any traditional culture.

Dairy: Never Needed During Pregnancy And Rarely Used Beyond Infancy

Historically, many cultures have included dairy products in their daily diet. Most have utilized goat or sheep milk. Those cultures that have used cow's milk have used original breeds; short and stocky with simple fat ratios, or tall and lean with low fat density. Almost all cultures that used dairy products prohibited its use during the childbearing year.

Seafood: Deep Ocean Fish Eaten As Often As Available, Seaweed Eaten As Often As Available
Flesh Foods: In Limitation Weekly (organic or wild)

Traditional cultures varied widely on the inclusion of animal products during the childbearing year. Almost all tribes utilized goat, kid and lamb during troubled pregnancies or post-partum, and most utilized small amounts of animal products in larger recipes. Nomadic people, always moving and thus extremely physically active, used moderate quantities of flesh foods during the childbearing cycle. In those tribes for which constant warring was a way of life,

relatively high quantities of animal products were consumed. In more stable and sedentary peoples, flesh foods in any form were eaten by childbearing women with substantial caution.

Of all possible flesh originating foods, seafood was the most commonly recommended food during the childbearing year. Inland peoples traded nuts and seeds and other easily available foods for the bounty of the ocean with seaside tribes. Treasured as life enhancing, these foods also evoked the image of birth and its salty amniotic fluid. Childbearing women were encouraged to eat freely from this group, supplementing their diets with freshwater fish when ocean fish were unavailable.

Sugars: Rarely Or Never Eaten In Pregnancy

All cultures had some form of natural sweetener; rice syrup, molasses, maple syrup, sorghum and honey being the most widely known. Sweeteners were viewed by all cultures as extremely special and would have been used during celebrations or added to special dishes. In childbearing women, sweeteners were consistently found to create problems during the entire childbearing cycle. No culture with a history of excellent childbearing and rearing outcome's permitted the consumption of sweeteners during the childbearing cycle, including the breastfeeding period.

Research and Tradition

Observing any culture anthropologically will often reveal choices that are attached to superstition. Food prohibitions and the childbearing year are no exception and do indeed include beliefs that describe foods and evil spirits in causal relationship. Yet, as with so much of traditional tribal behavior, current scientific studies are revealing that the problems traditional people saw and the prohibitions they placed on food choices were wise beyond their vision of cause and effect.

Research has shown that grains, legumes, nuts and seeds contain a variety of amino acids – the building blocks of cellular growth – yet none are complete alone. Combining two or more of these foods throughout the day provides a highly nutritious and complete protein source that is a more easily digested meal than slow digesting meat. Heavy foods – which require a greater degree of time to digest – can become bogged down within the intestines, leading to reduction of available or absorbed nutrients. Additionally, the longer partially digested foods remain within the intestines, the greater the chance of fermentation, with gas, constipation, dehydration and yeast overgrowth being the likely result. By eliminating or severely restricting most meats, dairy and sugars from a pregnant or breastfeeding mother's diet, all remaining foods move through the intestines more quickly, leaving their nutrients readily available for quick uptake into the blood stream.

A woman's body undergoes tremendous changes during the childbearing year. All of which are initiated through a chain of commands executed through hormones. These hormones must be produced and utilized at a speed unlike any her body will work at at any other time in her life. A variety of fats, immediately accessible, are the building locks of hormone production. Cholesterol levels rise during pregnancy – reaching around 300 by term – making the types of fats eaten and the layer of fat women develop during pregnancy essential for childbearing success. The fats in nuts, seeds and legumes combine with their high level of calcium to provide a perfect medium for hormone production and utilization. Fish oils, particularly **deep ocean fish**, have been shown to contain the highest levels of Omega Oils of all flesh foods. These oils, unique in structure and function, have been proven to maximize all known hormone production conducive to childbearing and reproductive health.

The hormones of pregnancy, predominately progesterone and relaxin, cause the muscles of the body to relax. The primary reason for this relaxation is to help the uterus support the growing baby, without viewing it as a physical threat to the mother and allowing contractions to begin too soon. This effect is indiscriminate however, and affects all systems within her body. Blood moves slower as muscles do not contract as aggressively, allowing blood to pool and prolapse (hemorrhoids and varicosities) in inactive and tense women. All the valves within the body open and close more irregularly, permitting acids to move upward into the esophagus (heartburn). Peristalsis within the intestines slows, moving fecal material at a much-reduced rate, encouraging the delayed bowel movements common in pregnancy. Calcium and Vitamin E, most easily absorbed from organic plant materials such as nuts, seeds, grains and dark vegetables, are necessary to mediate this action. In the concentrated, high potassium form found in dairy products and flesh foods, calcium is actually leached out of the body while the dairy calcium is deposited in inaccessible areas of the body. Vitamin E, abundantly available in unprocessed grains, is destroyed very rapidly after the grain core is cracked, making diets high in flours nutritionally deficient.

As early as 1930's the US Department of Agriculture published a detailed report finding the farm soils depleted of minerals due to overuse and addition of fertilizers. Citing a subsequent loss available minerals in the vegetables grown in these soils, organic gardening found its' first confirmation of value. Wild vegetables go a step further in their trace mineral content. In choosing the soil in which they will grow, all wild foods naturally choose areas high in minerals, and grow with strength and vitality. Minerals are essential for proper growth and function of the body, regulating blood production, bone development and cellular replication.

Certain foods, such as sugars, caffeine, alcohol and fried foods actually destroy nutrients before the body can utilize them. Sugars, for instance, nearly completely destroy the B-vitamins, one of the most important vitamins for nerve health. Sugar, dairy, processed cereal and concentrated fruit sources like jams also feed yeast, a natural cellular component of the body. Overgrowth of yeast destroys the natural flora of the intestines and further reduces absorption of B-vitamins and proper utilization of calcium. Intestinal health is essential for a strong immune system; thus the destruction of natural flora and malabsorption of nutrients opens an invitation to bacteria and subsequent immune compromise.

Toward Healthy Mothers and Babies

Traditional cultures were able to look over time at nutrition, health and childbearing outcome anecdotally; one poor childbearing experience was cause for reflection and change which included a serious look at what other women whose outcomes had been better had done. Traditional midwives learned quickly that a pregnant woman could only harvest what she had sown, and thus they focused quite heavily on diet, exercise, emotional support and building a knowledgeable foundation about wellness. The traditional views on food choices offer the modern woman an opportunity to reflect upon her own choices, helping her build a healthy pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding experience which is neither theoretical or statistical but personal and satisfying.

As you move through your childbearing year, the needs and wellness of both you and your baby's developing bodies will reveal themselves in varying degrees of sensations. Eager energy upon rising in the morning and even energy throughout the day signals a balanced, healthy body. Clear, elastic skin and shiny hair and nails provide evidence that you are eating well and thriving in the pregnant state you will live for nearly one year. If these are not the patterns in which you experience your pregnancy, you would do well to reflect upon your diet, instituting changes that can support a lifetime of wellness and a feeling of joy in your body.

The following books are excellent cookbooks. They will add to the information you can gain from the books mentioned previously, giving you the "cook's advantage" of wisdom *and* skill.

Amazing Grains by Joanne Saltzman

Wheatless Cooking by Lyn Coffrey

Sweet and Sugarfree by Karen E. Barkie

Moosewood Cookbook by Molly Katzen

The Gluten-free Gourmet by Bette Hagmen

World of the East Vegetarian Cooking by Madhur Jaffrey

Whole Foods For Whole People by Lucy Fuller

Tassajara Baking by Edward Espe Brown

Romancing the Bean by Joanne Saltzman

A Vegetarians Ecstasy by James Levin, MD

Friendly Foods by Brother Ron Pickarski, OFM

Vegetarian Times Complete Cookbook by Vegetarian Times

Further Reading in Traditional or Research Oriented Dietary Choices

Native Nutrition by Ronald Schmidt, PHD, Ballantine, 1991

Nutrition Secrets of the Ancients by Dr. Gene Spiller and Rowena Hubbard, Prima, 1994

Diet for a Poisoned Planet by David Steinman, Ballantine, 1990

Diet for a New America by John Robbins, Stillpoint, 1987