

Dietitians provide the link to happy, healthy pregnancies

If you think adopting a healthy eating plan is something you only need to do once you're pregnant or as your pregnancy moves along, think again. According to the Association for Dietetics in South Africa (ADSA), the composition of a women's diet before, during and after pregnancy may influence the pregnancy, the delivery and the health of mother and child later on.

"Many women of childbearing age don't have good eating plans, and as a result may lack essential nutrients. To optimise the health outcomes of both mother and child, women should make changes to their lifestyle and eating plans before they become pregnant, as well as during and after pregnancy," explains Berna Harmse, ADSA president.

ADSA advises that women who plan to fall pregnant or who are already pregnant consult a registered dietitian to assess their nutrient needs and identify eating plans that meet these needs.

The key components of a health promoting lifestyle during pregnancy include:

- appropriate weight gain
- appropriate physical activity
- enjoying a variety of foods of good quality.

Dietitians can also help women establish realistic short and long-term goals, and equip them with techniques to help them stay on track with their eating plan. This is important to ensure appropriate weight gain and nutrient intake.

A woman's body needs different levels of nutritional support at the various stages of her pregnancy. A dietitian can advise on the correct nutrient intake she needs, with this being provided through adapted food intake or through supplements such as folic acid and iron.

The extra energy needed from foods during pregnancy is quite small. The amount of extra food to be provided in the eating plan will depend on the age and activity level of the woman as well as her prepregnancy weight. For example, during the second and third trimesters of pregnancy, a woman with a healthy body weight will need only an extra 1200kJ (300Cal) per day; this could be supplied by an extra glass of low fat milk and a peanut butter sandwich. However, her needs for many micronutrients will increase, highlighting the importance of appropriate food choices.

Dietitians take these and other factors into account and advise women on them in determining their prepregnancy and pregnancy eating plans; optimal nutrition before and after conception is vital for positive health outcomes for mother and child.