

Key vitamins and minerals needed for a healthy pregnancy

Many women have heard of the importance of getting enough folic acid when they are pregnant, but do not know that it is needed in the very early stages of pregnancy, often before many of the women even realise they are pregnant.

The daily requirements for a number of key micronutrients increase before and during pregnancy. During the first two months of pregnancy the baby and the placenta develop quickly and are sensitive to both excesses and deficiencies in micronutrients.

“Folic acid is needed during pregnancy – most critically in the very early stages. At this time it helps reduce the risk of a neural tube defect developing in the baby, and may help prevent other birth defects too,” explains Berna Harmse, ADSA president.

Folic acid also has other roles in the body; it plays a vital role in preventing maternal anaemia. “In South Africa, many women will receive an iron-folic acid supplement routinely in their antenatal care. Many women don’t get enough of these two nutrients from their eating plan; iron-rich foods (such as meat) are expensive and folate rich foods are not typically eaten in large amounts. But these nutrients are important as they work together to help prevent anaemia developing during pregnancy,” adds Harmse.

Maternal anaemia is linked to an increased risk of adverse outcomes during pregnancy; such as low birth weight and premature deliveries. It’s more difficult to prevent anaemia developing during pregnancy if women are anaemic before falling pregnant. Therefore, adopting a healthy, balanced diet before conceiving is important.

A healthy eating plan supplies most nutrients that are needed from the foods selected. Occasionally this may need to be bolstered with appropriate supplementation of specific micronutrients. But supplements aren’t essential for every pregnant woman, and excesses of some nutrients can be harmful. Women are advised to consult a dietitian before and during pregnancy. They will learn about appropriate eating plans and, if necessary, about supplementation, based on their own needs.