

HEALTH & BEAUTY

# WHY YOU SHOULD WORRY ABOUT...

## WHAT YOU EAT DURING PREGNANCY

By Agnes Kyotalengerire

**M**y husband always encouraged me to eat enough when we were expecting our second baby. Every evening, he would return with bags full of milk, eggs, tins of yoghurt and fruits, such as bananas and avocado. He encouraged me to eat, saying it would keep me healthy and strong, recounts Maria Iwesigye, a mother of two, who runs a bakery in Kampala.

For James Okoth, a father of four, every time his wife was pregnant, he ensured she had a balanced diet. "Even when we did not have enough money, I always made it a point that my wife had a balanced diet, which included beef, fish or beans, with plenty of fruits and vegetables," Okoth recalls. He adds that he knows his efforts paid off because all their babies were born healthy and they rarely fall sick.

The role Okoth played attests to what nutritionists and health experts say: It takes a whole family to have healthy babies.

"Men have a big role to play in encouraging their pregnant wives to eat a balanced diet, to ensure proper growth of the baby," Freda Akile, a senior midwife, says.

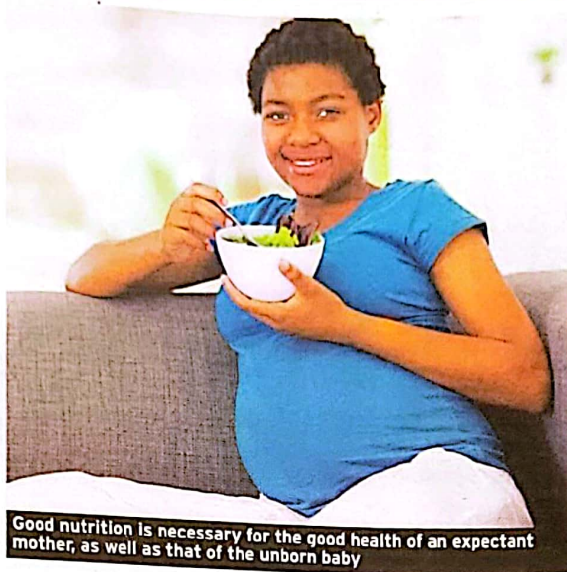
Akile also says good nutrition and enough rest are necessary for the health of an expectant mother, as well as that of the unborn baby.

### Folic acid

Geoffrey Babughirana, a maternal and child health expert, says women need a balanced diet with adequate intake of foods rich in folic acid (folate) long before they conceive. Folic acid is needed in the proper development of a baby and reduces the risk of congenital defects, such as spina bifida and hydrocephalus in a baby, Babughirana explains.

Potential mothers should supplement their diet with folic acid tablets. Folic acid is an essential vitamin B complex nutrient that is responsible for early congenital growth and development of the child. It also plays a role in the production of red blood cells that help the baby's neural tube develop into the brain and spinal cord.

In addition, Babughirana encourages mothers to eat at least two servings of dark green leafy vegetables a day.



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The vegetables should cover half of one's plate. Examples are *dodo*, *nakati*, cabbage, pumpkin leaves and legumes, like beans which are a good source of folic acid. Other good sources of folic acid are liver, dairy products, mushroom, fresh maize and boiled eggs.

### Recommended foods

Peter Rukundo, a lecturer at Kyambogo University's department of human

nutrition and home economics, says: "During pregnancy, nutritional demands for the mother increase to support the growing baby. Therefore, the mother should ensure a balanced diet."

Babughirana explains that for every meal, a pregnant woman should have at least one food from each of the groups, that is carbohydrates, proteins, fruits and vegetables, and drinking plenty of water.

Fruits and vegetables are important, in providing Vitamin C and several minerals, which are useful for repair of tissues, building healthy bones and skin, wound repair and also increases the mother's immunity and helps her fight infections.

Additionally, Vitamin C enables the baby to grow strong bones and teeth.

Proteins are good for building and repair of body cells. Whereas, carbohydrates will provide the body with energy required to carry the pregnancy, as well as preparing for delivery.

In addition to the three main meals, an expectant mother needs a mid-morning and mid-afternoon snack.

A mid-morning snack could be a small portion of *katogo* or a mixture of fruits. One could have a light meal, such as a cup of porridge for the late afternoon snack.

### Iron

A pregnant woman is advised to eat foods rich in iron every day. Iron is necessary in the making of blood for the mother and the baby. Rukundo says foods rich in iron include red meat, liver, offals and eggs. Others

are red coloured vegetables, such as beetroot, wholegrain maize, millet and sorghum. Rukundo advises that when one takes plant-based sources of iron, they should consume it with a citrus fruit, such as orange or lemon. He explains that the vitamin C in the citrus fruits helps the body to absorb iron from plant sources.

He also encourages pregnant women to take iron supplements, which are usually provided when one goes for antenatal check-up.

### Calcium-rich foods

A daily intake of calcium-rich foods, for example, milk and dairy products, such as yoghurt and cream, as well as silver fish (*mukene*), meat and green leafy vegetables, will provide calcium, which is vital for the growth of strong bones for the baby.

### Severe nausea and vomiting – what to eat

Severe nausea and vomiting during the first few months of pregnancy usually makes it hard for expectant mothers to ensure proper nutrition, but Rukundo advises mothers to ensure they eat or drink more frequent light meals or drinks to replace the fluids lost through vomiting.

Andabati says many mothers with severe nausea can get relief by eating dry foods. This can be roasted cassava, *gonja*, sweet potatoes or even charcoal-grilled beef or chicken. Snacking on roasted cereals, such as soybeans, groundnuts along with a cup of tea helps because they are not fatty. Eating flavoured or fatty foods may cause nausea.



A balanced diet

## HOW TO HANDLE CRAVINGS

### Sugary and fatty foods

Cravings is a common occurrence in pregnancy. However, Dr Gonzaga Andabati, a senior gynaecologist and obstetrician, advises pregnant women not to overindulge in fatty and sugary foods and alcohol, which provide the body with too many calories which are later converted into fat putting the mother at risk of weight gain. This predispose

a mother to gestational diabetes and the baby to defects of the heart, brain and spinal cord.

Rukundo also warns against overindulgence in processed and canned foods, saying they contain a lot of salt, which may predispose the mother to high blood pressure.

### Alcohol and smoking

Alcohol consumption and smoking during pregnancy

can cause a miscarriage or giving birth to a baby with congenital abnormalities, for example, lung defects.

### Coffee

"When taken, coffee has detrimental effects on the baby, warns Andabati. "For example, it goes to the brain and also increases the heart rate putting the unborn baby at risk of heart failure," Andabati explains. He adds that for the mother, coffee

interferes with the sleep pattern yet she enough rest.

### Craving soil

Craving soil or clay could be an indicator of iron deficiency. Eating the soil alone does not have any health benefits apart from relieving the mother of the urge.

Mothers should avoid eating contaminated soil as this predisposes them to infections.

### Should you eat for two?

Eating for two is a cliché that many pregnant women use to imply they are feeding to provide the nutritional requirements for their unborn babies. Others will use it to justify their high appetite.

Whichever reasons an expectant mother has, Andabati says there is no harm with her eating as much as she wants, especially in the first three to six months of pregnancy. In the first six months, the baby needs a lot of nutrients to set up its body system. However, after that, eating a lot increases the baby's weight thus making it a challenge for the mother to have a natural birth.