

## Wise Use of Herbs and Vitamins during Pregnancy

by Linda B. White, M.D.

To make love with the goal of creating a child represents longing incarnate. It is an act both wonderfully irrational and a bit reckless. Once the child within takes hold, you are no longer one, even after the birth. Being pregnant reminded me of those Russian Matrushka dolls with tiny women nestled one inside the other--only in pregnancy, the figures are strung together by umbilical cords. Motherhood can evoke feelings that run the gamut from profound to mundane, rapturous to maddening.

A woman and her fetus are literally connected--spiritually, emotionally, and physically. If you desire a child, now is the time to optimize your health. A few weeks--critical ones for organ development--typically pass between conception and the realization that you are pregnant. Susun Weed, herbalist and author of [Wise Woman Herbal for the Childbearing Year](#), offers the following advice: "Basically, what we should be doing every day of our lives is taking care of ourselves--getting sufficient rest, eating well, exercising, making sure that we're touched lovingly, that we're supported by people who believe in us and encourage us."

### Herbs Commonly Used during Pregnancy

Although herbs are not necessarily needed by all women during pregnancy, the following herbs are recommended by experienced herbalists and have been used safely by women for centuries. Kathryn Cox, owner of [Motherlove](#), an herbal company for women in Laporte, Colorado, suggests generally choosing herbs that can be eaten as food: nutritive herbs rich in vitamins and minerals such as red raspberry leaf, nettles, alfalfa, and dandelion. Rosemary Gladstar, author of [Herbal Healing for Women](#), stresses that with these traditional pregnancy herbs the whole plant is meant to be used, preferably eaten as a vegetable (in the case of dandelion greens or nettles) or in some cases taken as a tea or tincture. Unless under the care of a health practitioner, pregnant women should not use concentrated botanicals that isolate a few chemical properties. Also, do not exceed recommended dosage guidelines unless advised to do so by your healthcare practitioner.

**Red Raspberry** is a tonic that has been used safely by people in North America and Europe for hundreds of years. Catherine Hunziker, owner of [WishGarden Herbs](#) and an instructor at the Rocky Mountain School of Botanical Medicine in Boulder, Colorado, calls it "the best all-around herb for a healthy pregnancy. It's a nourishing, building herb that has an affinity for the reproductive system."

This nutritive herb is rich in calcium, magnesium, iron, phosphorus, potassium, vitamins B, C, and E, and the alkaloid fragarine--the constituent that contributes to the plant's potency as a pregnancy tonic. It increases fertility in men and women (especially when combined with red clover), tones the uterus, eases morning sickness, and assists in plentiful milk production.

If you have a history of miscarriage, some herbalists recommend that you should delay using the common variety of red raspberry (*Rubus idaeus*) by itself, especially as a tincture, until after the first trimester. You can then drink one to two cups of tea a day every other day. Also, if your previous labor has been under three hours, red raspberry may be contraindicated. Check with your health practitioner.

To make a tea, add one to two tablespoons dried leaf per cup of boiling water and steep ten to 20 minutes. You may want to alternate red raspberry with other nutritive herbs such as nettles or combine it with other nourishing herbs. Motherlove's "Tea for Two" recipe contains red raspberry, red clover (blood cleansing), nettles (nourishing), alfalfa (also nourishing), and spearmint (tastes good and calms the stomach).

**Nettles** are rich in biochelated iron, calcium, and protein, as well as a host of other important nutrients. "It is virtually a pregnancy tonic by itself," says Gladstar. The benefits of drinking nettle infusion before and throughout pregnancy include nourishing and strengthening the kidneys, increasing fertility in men and women, nourishing the mother and the fetus, diminishing leg cramps and childbirth pain, preventing hemorrhage after birth, reducing hemorrhoids, and increasing the richness and amount of mother's milk. According to Sharol Tilgner, ND, president of Wise Women Herbals in Creswell, Oregon, nettles should be picked prior to flowering to avoid bladder and kidney irritation. Although use as a tonic is considered safe in pregnancy, concentrated extracts of stinging nettles (such as used to treat hay fever) can act as an abortifacient.

**Alfalfa** is loaded with vitamins A, D, E, and K, eight digestive enzymes, and numerous trace minerals. It is particularly helpful in late pregnancy because the vitamin K it supplies promotes proper blood clotting, thereby reducing the risk of postpartum hemorrhage.

**Dandelion.** Both the leaf and root of this common garden "weed" provide many essential nutrients: vitamins A and C, iron, calcium, potassium, and many trace elements. The root is said to be a specific remedy for the liver. The leaf is a mild, nonirritating diuretic, which can reduce water retention during pregnancy. You can eat fresh leaves as salad greens, cook them, or steep them as a tea. However, because dandelion is rich in vitamin A, a fat-soluble vitamin that can accumulate in the body, use only in moderation.

### **Herbs to Avoid during Pregnancy**

Experts agree that pregnant women should avoid herbs that have strong medicinal or potentially toxic effects. Francis Brinker, ND, author of *The Toxicology of Botanical Medicines*, notes that many of the herbs not recommended help initiate menstrual flow, particularly in nonpregnant women. For women who miscarry easily, higher doses of these herbs in early pregnancy may increase this risk.

Under professional guidance, a woman may be advised to take some of these herbs to treat specific conditions, including complications of pregnancy. For instance, herbalists have traditionally used black haw, false unicorn root, cramp bark, and wild yam root for threatened miscarriage. Both blue cohosh and black cohosh are sometimes recommended during the last weeks of pregnancy to prepare the uterus for childbirth or to stimulate contractions. Shepherd's purse has been utilized to abate hemorrhaging during childbirth.

The point is not to self-medicate with the following botanicals. It is also important to realize that the examples in each category do not represent an exhaustive list.

- Herbs that stimulate uterine contractions: birthwort, blue cohosh, cinchona, cotton root bark, ergot (as in commercial preparations for migraine headaches), goldenseal, gotu kola, Peruvian bark.
- Herbs that stimulate menstrual flow: agave, angelica, bethroot, black cohosh, chicory, feverfew (in flower), hyssop, horehound, lovage, milk this-tie, mistletoe, motherwort, mugwort, nasturtium seed, osha, fresh parsley leaves (especially placed vaginally), pennyroyal, poke root, pulsatilla, rue, saffron, sumac berries, tansy, thuja (white cedar), watercress, wormwood, yarrow.
- Herbs high in volatile oils (which can stimulate or irritate the uterus): eucalyptus, nutmeg, osha, yerba mansa, and the mint family members basil, catnip, lemon balm, marjoram, oregano, peppermint, pennyroyal, rosemary, true sage, and thyme. For the common culinary herbs, the concern lies with the use of high doses in women susceptible to miscarriage, not with using herbs to flavor food.
- Plants high in alkaloids (which can also stimulate the uterus): barberry, blood root, broom, goldenseal, coffee, mandrake, tea.
- Herbs that affect hormonal function: dong quai, hops, licorice, motherwort, wild yam.
- Harsh herbal laxatives: aloe, cascara sagrada, purging buckthorn, rhubarb, senna, and yellow dock (in large amounts).
- Strong diuretics: juniper berries, uvaursi (bearberry).

### **Nutrition during Pregnancy**

You need to stay well nourished for your own health and that of the child developing within. When should you start to eat wisely? Now. Irwin Rosenberg, MD, director of the US Department of Agriculture Human Nutrition Center on Aging at Tufts University, emphasizes that sound nutrition is important not only during pregnancy but at the time of conception. Because the timing of conception is often unpredictable, he says, "Ideally women ought to be maintaining good nutrition throughout their childbearing years."

Should pregnant women take vitamin supplements? Generally, the best way to get vitamins and minerals is by eating a varied diet of whole foods, one that includes an abundance of grains, legumes, fruits, vegetables, food herbs, nuts, seeds, and, if you're not a vegetarian, dairy and lean meats.

Vitamins and minerals from foods tend to be well absorbed and assimilated, with little risk of overdose. "Healthy food is, by far, more important than supplements," says Betsy Walker, MS, who teaches nutrition during pregnancy at the [Seattle Midwifery School](#). "If a woman is getting a very good quality diet, I don't think she absolutely needs supplements. Women who are not receiving good nutritional counseling should be taking a prenatal supplement." Because vitamins and minerals extract easily into vinegar, Cox makes a cider vinegar extract of dandelion leaf, nettles, parsley, burdock root, and violet leaf, which she adds to greens and grains for extra nutrition.

Although the [National Academy of Sciences](#) recommends that prenatal vitamins be prescribed on an individual basis, depending on a woman's nutritional status, routine prenatal vitamins have become the standard of care. However, no amount of vitamin pills can substitute for a healthy diet. Furthermore, when it comes to supplements, more doesn't mean better. Unless advised to do so by your health practitioner, don't take megadoses of single vitamins during pregnancy. The main concern is vitamin A, an excess of which has been associated with birth defects. Other vitamins and minerals can also be toxic to the fetus, and an excess of one mineral can unbalance others.

Studies show that diets of pregnant women most often lack four vitamins (folic acid, B-6, D, and E) and four minerals (calcium, magnesium, iron, and zinc).<sup>1</sup> Of these, iron is the most difficult to obtain from diet alone. The recommended daily allowances (RDA) for pregnancy listed below represent the amount a woman should derive from diet, plus or minus a supplement.

**Folic acid** is necessary for DNA synthesis, and therefore critical in the development of all tissues, particularly the nervous system's. Oral contraceptives may deplete folic acid levels. Diet surveys have found folic acid intake to be low in the US, particularly among women and blacks.<sup>2</sup>

Deficiencies have been linked to megaloblastic anemia and neural tube defects (incomplete development of the brain and spinal cord). Folic acid supplementation has been shown to reduce recurrence of neural tube defects by 72 percent.<sup>3</sup> When a group of more than 2,000 women took a multivitamin that included 800 micrograms of folic acid from the time of conception through the first three months of pregnancy, their babies had 50 percent fewer birth malformations of all types and no neural tube defects.<sup>4</sup>

Because the neural tube forms within the first four weeks of pregnancy, you need to get sufficient folic acid while you're trying to conceive. The US Public Health Service 1992 advisory statement recommends all women of childbearing age get 400 micrograms a day and not exceed 1 milligram a day, except under medical supervision.

RDA: 400 mcg.

Food sources: liver (750 mcg. in 3.5 oz.), whole grains, legumes (358 mcg. in 1 cup lentils), sunflower seeds (317 mcg. in 1 cup), beans (292 mcg. in 1 cup pinto beans), green leafy vegetables (200 mcg. in 1 cup frozen spinach, 171 mcg. in 1 cup turnip greens), citrus fruits (109 mcg. in 1 cup orange juice), broccoli (104 mcg. in 1 cup), and brewer's yeast. Herbal sources include dandelion, amaranth greens, lamb's quarter, nettle, and red clover.

**Vitamin B-6** is important in the breakdown and utilization of carbohydrates, fats, and proteins, and in the production of antibodies and red blood cells. Oral contraceptives can deplete this vitamin. A deficiency may aggravate morning sickness, which supplementation can help relieve. In one clinical study, 342 pregnant women were randomly assigned to receive either 30 mg. of vitamin B-6 or a placebo. Compared to the placebo group, the women taking vitamin B-6 reported a significant reduction in nausea and vomiting, although one-third continued to experience gastrointestinal upset.<sup>5</sup>

RDA: 2.2 mg.

Food sources (contents given in mg. per 3.5-oz. serving): torula yeast (3), brewer's yeast (2.5), sunflower seeds (1.25), toasted wheat germ (1.15), legumes (.81 for dry soybeans), walnuts (.73), whole grains (.55 for brown rice), fruits (.51 for bananas), green leafy vegetables such as spinach (.28), and meat, fish, and poultry.

**Calcium** is vital to the health of bones and teeth in both the fetus and the mother. It's important not to take calcium and iron at the same time because each counters the absorption of the other. For this reason, some practitioners recommend that women take a multivitamin that contains iron and, at another time, a calcium supplement. In addition, a high protein intake depletes calcium stores, which is one reason the RDA is so high (since most Americans consume more protein than they need). If you follow a lower protein vegetarian diet, you may not need this much calcium.

RDA: 1,200 mg.

Food sources: sardines (370 mg. in 3 oz.), dairy products (300 mg. in 1 cup low-fat milk), mackerel, firm tofu processed with calcium, seaweed, tahini, almonds, dark leafy greens (180 mg. in 1/2 cup), salmon (165 mg. in 3 oz. canned with bones), broccoli (70 mg. in 1/2 cup), beans, lentils, blackstrap molasses, and dried fruit. Herbs containing calcium include nettles, red raspberry leaves, oatseed, oatstraw, alfalfa, chamomile, borage, dandelion, and red clover. A cup of lamb's quarters or amaranth greens contains about 400 mg. An infusion of two handfuls of nettle, red clover, raspberry leaf, or oatstraw in 2 to 4 cups boiling water, steeped 4 to 8 hours, contains 250 to 300 mg. per cup. Food herbs rich in calcium generally also contain magnesium in a ratio well utilized by the body.

**Vitamin A** is essential in building strong bones and teeth, and in the growth and repair of all tissues, especially skin and mucous membranes. Because of the potential toxicity of high doses, which are associated with birth defects, stay within recommended guidelines. Beta-carotene, which the body converts to vitamin A, is considered more beneficial and is not associated with toxicity.

RDA: 4,000 IU

Food sources (given in IU of beta carotene): Orange fruits and vegetables such as carrots (11,000 in 1 large carrot), sweet potatoes, winter squash, (2,700 in 2 to 3 medium), cantaloupe (3,400 in 1/4 melon), peaches (1,330 in 1 medium), and dark leafy greens like mustard and kale (7,400 in 3/4 cup cooked), spinach (7,300 in 1/2 cup cooked). The best herb source is dandelion (3,500 to 6,500 in a 1/2 cup of steamed or fresh dandelion greens), although you do not need that much--just adding a few leaves to your salad will boost your vitamin intake. Other herb sources include alfalfa, cayenne, paprika, and elderberries.

**Vitamin C** is essential for collagen synthesis, as well as amino acid and thyroid hormone production; it also aids iron and calcium absorption.

RDA: 70 mg.

Food sources: guava (242 mg. in 1 medium), papaya, green peppers (96 mg. in 3.5 oz.), broccoli (90 mg. in 2/3 cup cooked), Brussels sprouts (87 mg. in 6 to 7 cooked), cauliflower (78 mg. in 1 cup), cabbage (47 mg. in 1 cup), turnip greens, strawberries (59 mg. in 10 large), citrus fruits (53 mg. in 1 orange), cantaloupe (33

mg. in 1/4 melon). Herbs include dandelion leaves, nettles, elderberries, rosehips, cayenne, violet leaves, pine needles, and alfalfa.

**Vitamin D** is important in the absorption of calcium and phosphorous and for the fetus's bone and tooth development.

RDA: 10 mcg. (400 IU)

Sources: sunshine, alfalfa, nettles, dairy, butter, eggs. Deficiency is rare.

**Vitamin E** is important for red blood cell growth and proper immune function.

RDA: 10 mg. or 10 IU

Food sources: wheat germ, vegetable oils, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, whole grains, eggs, spinach, soybeans, hazelnuts, almonds, and seaweeds. Herbs include alfalfa, rosehips, raspberry leaf, and dandelion.

**Vitamin K** is necessary for the formation of thrombin--a chemical critical to blood clotting. In the presence of certain intestinal bacteria, our bodies can make this fat-soluble vitamin. Insufficient vitamin K can contribute to postpartum hemorrhaging.

RDA: 65 mcg.

Food sources: (given as mcgs. per 3.5-oz. serving): kale (729), green tea (712), leafy greens such as turnip greens (650) and spinach (415), broccoli (200), lettuce (129), cabbage (125), watercress (57), asparagus (57), oats (20), green peas (19), and whole wheat (17).

**Iron** requirements double in pregnancy, chiefly to keep up with the production of hemoglobin (the chemical that carries oxygen in red blood cells) in mother and fetus.

RDA: 30 mg. The drawback of supplemental iron is constipation. Absorption is increased by vitamin C.

Food sources: clams (24 mg. in 3 oz.), oysters (11 mg. in 3 oz.), legumes (9 mg. in 1 cup soybeans), tofu (7 to 13 mg. in 4 oz. firm), organ meats (6 mg. in 3 oz. beef liver, 15 mg. in 3 oz. pork liver), whole grains (5 mg. in 1 cup cooked quinoa), beans (4 mg. in 1 cup cooked pinto beans), dark, leafy greens (3 mg. in a cup cooked spinach), dried fruits (2 mg. in 5 figs), seeds, nuts (especially almonds), egg yolks, rosehips, and blackstrap molasses (6 mg. in 2 tbsp.). Herbs containing iron include yellow dock root, dandelion root, nettles, and alfalfa. According to Cox, these herbs provide an assimilable source of iron that is nonconstipating.

**Zinc** is important in enzyme function, the formation of insulin, protein synthesis, development of reproductive organs, and immune function. In a study of women with blood zinc levels below the median, the group who took a prenatal vitamin that included a zinc supplement bore infants of greater birthweight and head circumference than the placebo group.<sup>6</sup>

RDA: 15 mg.

Food sources: (given as mg. per 3.5 oz. serving): fresh oysters (148.7), pumpkin seeds (7.5), gingerroot (6.8), nuts (3 to 4), whole wheat (3.2), oats (3.2), lima beans (3.1), green peas (1.6), garlic (.6).

## Natural Remedies for Common Pregnancy Complaints

**Morning sickness** afflicts millions of pregnant women to some degree. Fortunately, several natural remedies offer relief.

Nutrition. Eat small, frequent meals and sip warm liquids. Foods rich in vitamin B-6 (whole grains, meats, blackstrap molasses) are said to alleviate nausea of all types, and clinical studies have shown relief with B-6 supplementation. Because morning sickness is often worse when your stomach is empty (especially when you first wake up in the morning), keep snacks on hand.

Herbs. Ginger is probably one of the best antinauseant remedies around. It is also an emmenagogue (initiates menstrual flow in nonpregnant women), not an abortifacient (induces miscarriage). If a woman is not pregnant but her period is late and she takes ginger, she's likely to start bleeding. If she is pregnant and has morning sickness, ginger can ease nausea and vomiting. In one clinical trial of women with severe nausea and vomiting of pregnancy, namely hyperemesis gravidarum, 250 mg. of powdered gingerroot four times a day significantly reduced discomfort.<sup>7</sup> A review of ginger's use as an antinausea remedy concluded that ginger is safe in pregnancy "provided normal doses are consumed."<sup>8</sup>

What form of ginger should you take? Weed responds, "Whatever form you can tolerate." Choose from fresh, dried, or powdered ginger, ginger tea, or crystallized ginger. Find your favorite type and place it by your bed-side to sip or nibble first thing in the morning. Gladstar's recipe for ginger tea is as follows: grate one to two teaspoons of fresh gingerroot, simmer in a cup of water for a few minutes, and add honey and lemon to taste. Mindy Green, herbalist and co-author of [Aromatherapy: A Complete Guide to the Healing Art](#), recommends an herbal tea of meadowsweet, spearmint, ginger, and chamomile. (Note: If you're allergic to ragweed, you may also be allergic to chamomile.) Red raspberry leaves are also said to soothe nausea.

Aromatherapy. Pregnancy tends to heighten your sense of smell, and foul odors may make you sick to your stomach. Pleasant aromas, on the other hand, such as oil of lavender, lemon, or spearmint, may alleviate nausea. Green reminds you not to apply essential oils undiluted to your skin and never to take them internally, adding, "The safest essential oils to use during pregnancy are those from flowers." For safety, she also suggests you wait to use essential oils until after the first trimester.

Homeopathy. Dana Ullman, MPH, author and director of the [Homeopathic Educational Services](#) in Berkeley, California, says that homeopathic medicines are safe to take during pregnancy. His list of remedies for morning sickness includes Sepia, Ipecac, Tabacum, Nux vomica, Bryonia, Ignatia, and Cocculus. To choose a remedy, Ullman suggests you read about them in a homeopathy self-help book.

**Insomnia.** Sleeplessness typically strikes in the third trimester, when a womb full of revolving elbows and knees interferes with comfortable repose.

Herbs. Herbs high in calcium, "nature's tranquilizer," soothe the nerves, promote restful sleep, and also ease muscle cramps. Some good ones for pregnant women are skullcap and oats (oatmeal, oatstraw, or oatseed). For relaxation, add a cloth bag full of chamomile and lavender blossoms to a warm bath before bed.

Aromatherapy. Inhaling essential oils of neroli, ylang-ylang, lavender, rose, and jasmine are said to calm the nervous system.

Homeopathy. The following remedies are often recommended for occasional difficulty sleeping: Coffea, Pulsatilla, Arnica, and Chamomilla. Consult a homeopathic self-help book to choose the correct one for you. Combination remedies for insomnia are also widely available.

**Stretch marks.** According to Green, massaging a pregnant belly (and breasts) with aromatherapy oils can help the skin expand and thus prevent stretch marks. She says that topical use of diluted essential oils is generally safe for healthy pregnant women, especially after the first trimester. She combines 15 drops lavender oil, 5 drops neroli oil, 2 drops rose oil, and 800 IU vitamin E in 4 oz. carrier oil. Gladstar's recipe for belly oil combines 1/2 cup cocoa butter, 1/2 cup coconut oil, 20,000 IU vitamin E oil, 2 tsp. grated beeswax, 1 tsp. lanolin, and 1/4 cup apricot, almond, or grape seed oil. Melt the ingredients together and rub this oil over belly and breasts two to three times a day. Or you can buy Motherlove's Pregnant Belly Oil, which combines comfrey, calendula, mallow, raspberry; and vitamin E in either olive oil or a beeswax and lanolin salve; or WishGarden's belly oil, which contains elderflower, comfrey, and bee pollen in olive and sweet almond oil.

**Hemorrhoids.** Motherlove's Rhoid Balm blends comfrey root, calendula, yarrow, and plantain in olive oil and beeswax. Their Sitz Bath combines comfrey, yarrow, uva-ursi, and sea salt in a muslin bag, to infuse into warm water. Used after the birth, this remedy helps heal tears and sore muscles of the pelvic floor. Sage Mountain has a salve of comfrey and St. John's wort. Because cold temperatures constrict swollen veins, Gladstar suggests you keep it in the refrigerator and apply it two to three times a day. Homeopathic remedies include Nux vomica, Belladonna, Muriatic acid, Aloe, Pulsatilla, Aesculus, and Hamamelis.

**Heartburn.** You can chew or make a tea of the seeds of digestive herbs such as fennel, anise, or dill.

**The Common Cold Herbs.** Echinacea (when not combined with goldenseal) is fine for any pregnant or lactating woman. Garlic, which is antibacterial, antiviral, and expectorant, may also be safely taken. Ginger, which is warming, can ease cold symptoms. Gladstar likes to use echinacea (immune boosting and antimicrobial), mullein (demulcent, expectorant), and elderberries or flowers (expectorant, diaphoretic, helpful in the early stages of cold and flu) alone or in combination. More than anything, it's important to treat yourself to a day in bed.

Vitamins. Because it is water-soluble, it's all right to take 1 to 2 grams of vitamin C a day.

Homeopathy. Self-care homeopathic texts list a number of homeopathic medicines. The choice depends on your symptoms. Alternatively, you can go with the shotgun approach of homeopathic combination remedies for colds.

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## Notes

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