Important nutrients during pregnancy

Folic acid supplements that contain 400µg are recommended each day in the months before pregnancy and also up to 12 weeks during pregnancy to prevent conditions such as spina bifida and other neural tube defects[1].

It is also important to include folate-rich foods (natural form of folic acid) in the diet, such as green vegetables (spinach, broccoli and brussel sprouts), beans and peas and fortified breads, milk and breakfast cereals that have added folic acid (check the labels). If there is a family history of Spina bifida, neural tube defects or if the pregnant woman is taking medication for epilepsy, a higher dose of folic acid is required and should be prescribed by the doctor[1].

Iron is important for the production of red blood cells. Read meat is an excellent source of iron. Other good sources include poultry, fish, baked beans, eggs, dark green leafy vegetables (e.g. spinach, broccoli), raisins and fortified milks and breakfast cereals (check the labels). To help the body absorb more iron from non-meat sources, combine a vitamin C rich food (e.g. citrus fruits, tomatoes, berries, peppers) in the same meal, e.g. pack omelettes with cherry tomatoes and peppers, or have a glass of pure fruit juice with a bowl of iron-fortified breakfast cereal.

If a pregnant mother is taking iron tablets, taking them at the same time as when eating a high-fibre cereal, or having tea/coffee should be avoided, as they can reduce the body's ability to utilize the iron.

Calcium is important for a baby's developing bones and teeth[1]. When pregnant or lactating a woman requires 1200mg/d (800mg/d at other times)[2]. Dairy foods are an excellent source of calcium. Low fat dairy products are best, as they contain the same amount of calcium but less fat than full fat varieties. Unpasteurised dairy products including soft- and mould-ripened cheese should be avoided during pregnancy to reduce the risk of exposure to the bacteria listeria that can be harmful to the baby. Other sources of calcium are fortified breakfast cereals, breads and orange juice (check the labels). Dark green leafy vegetables also contain a small amount of calcium.

If a pregnant mother is using soya alternative products, they should use varieties that contain added calcium as these products are naturally lower in calcium.

Vitamin D is important as it helps the body absorb the calcium in food. The reaction of ultraviolet B (UVB) rays in sunlight on our skin is the main source of vitamin D. However, due to Ireland's northerly latitude, little UVB light reaches the earth's surface and so reduces the production of vitamin D[3]. Vitamin D can be sourced through the diet and due to the lack of vitamin D production from sunlight, dietary sources are very important. Good sources are oily fish (e.g. sardines, herring, mackerel) and egg yolks. Also some brands of breakfast cereal, margarines and milks are fortified with vitamin D (check the labels). Poor vitamin D status is a problem among pregnant women in Ireland and infants are dependent on maternal vitamin D status. For information on the new vitamin D supplementation recommendations for infants please go to the FAQ's section of the website.

Omega-3 fatty acids are important for the baby's brain and eye development[1]. Omega fatty acids are essential fats that can only be sourced through the diet. Oily fish, such as herring, mackerel, salmon, sardines or trout are excellent sources of omega-3. Other sources include white fish such as cod and whiting (but in much lower levels) some plant/nut oils such as canola (rapeseed), linseed, flaxseed and walnut oil, some nuts and seeds for example sesame, flaxseed and walnuts. A pregnant mother should aim to eat one portion of oily fish and one portion of white fish each week.

References

1. Health Promotion Unit for the Department of Health and Children. Healthy Eating for Pregnancy. Health Service Executive 2006.
2. Food Safety Authority of Ireland. Recommended Dietary Allowances for Ireland 1999. Online at www.fsai.ie 1999
3. Food Safety Authority of Ireland. Recommendations for a National Policy on Vitamin D supplementation for infants in Ireland. Online at www.fsai.ie 1999