

Healthy Start vitamins and why you need them



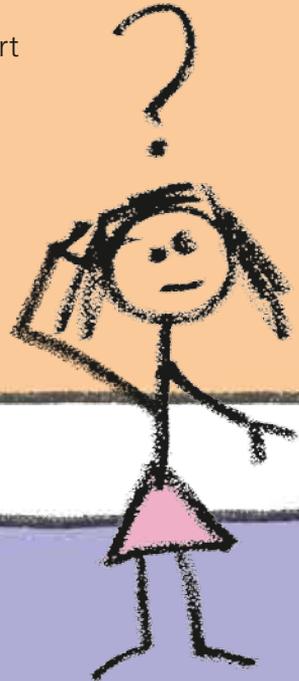
HEALTHY START

So what are vitamins anyway?

Vitamins are essential nutrients that your body needs in small amounts so that it can work properly.

Even though you can get lots of vitamins from a healthy balanced diet, you still might not get everything you need at certain times in your life – like when you're pregnant, a new mum or a small child. So the UK Health Departments recommend that at these times you should take a supplement containing specific vitamins to help make sure you get everything you need.

Read on to find out more about Healthy Start vitamins and the Healthy Start scheme.



Folic acid



Taking a folic acid supplement before you're pregnant and until the 12th week of your pregnancy is really important because it reduces the chances of your baby being born with a neural tube defect (NTD) such as spina bifida – a birth defect where the spine doesn't form properly. You should start to take folic acid (400 micrograms a day) when you're planning to become pregnant. But if you didn't take folic acid before you conceived, you should start taking it as soon as you know you're pregnant, and carry on until your 12th week of pregnancy. (It's also safe to carry on taking folic acid past the 12th week of pregnancy.)

As well as taking a supplement you should also try to eat plenty of foods containing folate – the natural form of folic acid. Good food sources of folate include broccoli, brussels sprouts, spinach, spring greens, peas, chickpeas, and granary and wholemeal breads. Folic acid is also added to some foods such as breakfast cereals.

Some women have an increased risk of having an NTD-affected pregnancy and should take a higher dose of 5 mg of folic acid each day until the 12th week of their pregnancy. You have an increased risk if you:

- have had a baby with an NTD
- have diabetes
- (or your partner) have an NTD or a family history of NTDs

In addition, if you're taking anti-epileptic medication you should consult your GP for advice, as you may need to take a higher dose of folic acid.

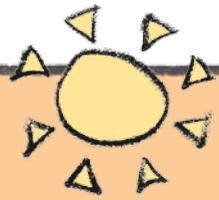
Healthy Start vitamins contain appropriate amounts of the recommended vitamin supplements for pregnant and breastfeeding women, and children aged from six months old. Children who are given infant formula won't need to take vitamin drops until they are drinking less than 500ml (about a pint) of formula a day.

Women's tablets: vitamins C, D and folic acid

Children's drops: vitamins A, C and D



Vitamin D



This vitamin helps our bodies to absorb calcium, which in turn keeps bones and teeth healthy. Small children and babies who don't get enough vitamin D can get softened bones which can lead to rickets. It's important that you get enough vitamin D while you're pregnant and breastfeeding to keep your bones healthy and to provide your baby with enough vitamin D to support them in their first few months.

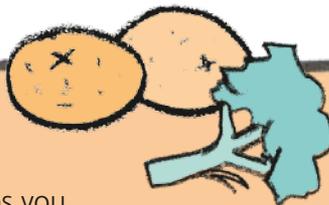
Children from six months to five years are advised to take vitamin drops containing vitamin D daily. Babies who are breastfed may need to be given vitamin drops from the age of one month if you did not take a vitamin D supplement during pregnancy.

Our main source of vitamin D is summer sunlight. The amount of sun you need is different for every person but is less than the amount that causes tanning or burning. Remember to cover up or protect your skin with sunscreen before it starts to turn red or burn. You can also find vitamin D in some foods such as oily fish, eggs, fortified fat spreads and breakfast cereals, but it's difficult to get enough from food alone.

People who are most at risk of a vitamin D deficiency include:

- all pregnant and breastfeeding women
- babies and young children under the age of five
- older people aged 65 years and over
- people who are not exposed to much sun, for example those who cover their skin for cultural reasons, who are housebound or confined indoors for long periods
- people with darker skin such as people of African, African-Caribbean and South Asian origin.

Vitamin C



Also known as ascorbic acid, vitamin C keeps you generally healthy. The body can't store vitamin C, so you need to have some every day.

It's found in a wide variety of fruit and vegetables and good sources include peppers, broccoli, brussels sprouts, sweet potatoes, oranges and kiwi fruit.

Vitamin A

Vitamin A has a number of important functions. It:

- helps maintain the health of skin and mucus linings (like in your nose for example)
- helps strengthen immunity against infections
- helps vision in dim light.



Good food sources include cheese, eggs, oily fish (such as mackerel), milk, fortified fat spreads and yoghurt.

Our bodies can also safely make vitamin A from the vitamin known as beta-carotene. Beta-carotene is found in yellow, orange and green (leafy) vegetables such as carrots, sweet potatoes, spinach and peppers, and yellow fruits such as mangoes and apricots.

Important: Vitamin A isn't included in the women's tablets, as pregnant women are advised not to take supplements containing vitamin A. Too much vitamin A (retinol) while you're pregnant can be harmful to your developing baby. Vitamin A is found in animal products. So if you're expecting you also shouldn't consume liver and liver products, including fish liver oil, which are too high in vitamin A for you at this time.

How do I get Healthy Start vitamins?

Pregnant women, women with a baby under one year old and children from six months to four years old who receive Healthy Start vouchers can also get free Healthy Start vitamins. On every second voucher letter there is a green coupon that you swap for your vitamins. To find out where you can collect them locally just ask your midwife or health visitor.



If you're not on the scheme, some NHS organisations and boards still offer the vitamins for free or sell them – just ask your midwife or health visitor.

Want to apply for Healthy Start?

Healthy Start provides pregnant women and low-income families with free vitamins and vouchers that can be used to buy milk, plain fresh or frozen fruit and vegetables (fruit and vegetables with nothing else added), and infant formula milk. To find out more or request an application form visit www.healthystart.nhs.uk or call **0845 607 6823**.

