

The A.B.C.'s of Prenatal Vitamins

If you are researching prenatal vitamins, we are guessing that you might be considering a pregnancy, or you just found out that you are pregnant. How exciting! We're also guessing that you have some questions. Pregnancy does that to a woman: it makes us start questioning the safety of everything that we used to take for granted. At **MotherToBaby**, we answer many types of questions about exposures during pregnancy and breastfeeding. But hands down, **the most common question I'm asked about involves prenatal vitamins.**

Many women ask me what brand of prenatal vitamins they should take or if the brand they are currently using is the right choice. With so many different prenatal vitamins available over-the-counter and by prescription, this is a very good question. We applaud you for doing your research. You are going to be a great Mom.

Prenatal Vitamin Tips

Before delving too much further, some basic tips. The **1st tip:** We recommend that you discuss your prenatal vitamin options with your healthcare provider, since she or he will know you and your health care needs the best. As mentioned, this will review prenatal vitamins for healthy women. Some women may have medical concerns that require a different nutrient intake.

The **2nd tip** that I always mention is that it may be easier **and cheaper** (depending on your healthcare insurance plan) to simply ask for a prescription for prenatal vitamins from your healthcare provider.

3rd tip: Do not buy a prenatal vitamin that contains herbal ingredients. Herbal products have not been well studied for use during pregnancy and breastfeeding. They are not regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and there are no standard recommended amounts to take. In addition, purity of herbals found in over-the-counter products can be of concern. For more information on why herbals should be avoided, please see our MotherToBaby fact sheet on **Herbal Products**.

Prenatal vitamins are made up of vitamins and minerals. A healthy diet is the best way to get the vitamins and minerals that your body needs. But even if we eat a healthy diet, we might fall short on some nutrients during pregnancy. Prenatal vitamins help fill in the gaps and increased needs for vitamins and minerals during a pregnancy.

There are **Dietary Reference Intakes (DRI)** to help people know how much of each vitamin or mineral they should aim to get each day.

Some vitamins and minerals also have a recommended **Tolerable Upper Intake Level (UL)**. The UL is designed to help us know the maximum recommended daily intake for a typical healthy person.

DRIs and ULs are there to help guide us in getting enough of a good thing but also to keep us from getting too much of a good thing.

As mentioned, vitamins should not be the only source of our nutrients. Therefore, your vitamin does not need to contain 100% of the DRI. Remember to take into account all sources of the vitamin or mineral when adding up your

daily intake. This means including food sources as well as any other supplements you might take. DRI values can change by age, gender, and pregnancy and breastfeeding status. If you have a medical condition, talk to your healthcare providers/dieticians for your specific dietary needs.

Research on taking vitamins and mineral supplements at levels that are higher than the DRI and UL during pregnancy are limited. Because of the lack of information about taking high levels of vitamins and minerals in a pregnancy, it is generally recommended that pregnant women do not exceed the DRI unless your healthcare provider has prescribed it for the medical management of a specific deficiency or medical condition.

Now, we come to the main question: **What are the basic vitamins / minerals generally suggested for prenatal vitamins for healthy women, and how much of each vitamin and mineral do women need for pregnancy?**

Vitamins and Minerals

For pregnant women 19 years old and older, the first 5 vitamins/minerals listed below are the basic supplements from which healthy pregnant women might benefit. The DRI and UL for pregnancy are listed. Not all items have an UL.

- **Iron:** DRI: 27 mg. UL: 45 mg.
- **Calcium:** DRI: 1,000mg. UL: 2,500mg. Supplements should have at least 250 mg, but all women should be getting at least 1,000 mg per day of elemental calcium.
- **Folic Acid (Folate):** DRI: 600 mcg (0.6 mg) to 800 mcg (0.8 mg). At least 400 mcg (0.4 mg) should be in your prenatal vitamin.
- All women who could become pregnant should be getting enough **folic acid / folate**, even if they are not currently planning on a pregnancy.
- **Iodine:** DRI: 220 mcg to 290 mcg. UL: 1,100 mcg. At least 150 mcg should be in your prenatal vitamin.
- **Vitamin D (calciferol):** DRI: at least 15 mcg (600 IU). UL 100 mcg (4,000 IU).

In addition to the above suggested supplements for prenatal vitamins, pregnant women should make sure they are getting enough of the vitamins / minerals listed below. If they cannot manage this with diet, then a supplement might help.

- **Vitamin A:** DRI 770 mcg. UL 3,000 mcg.
 - Vitamin A is found in two primary forms: plant-based carotenes (**beta-carotene**) and animal-based retinoids (**retinol**, retinal, retinoic acid, retinyl palmitate, and retinyl acetate).
 - Look for vitamin A that is from beta-carotene. Beta-carotene is less likely to build up toxic levels in the body than with retinoids. In addition, high levels of retinoids (**retinol**, retinal, retinoic acid, retinyl palmitate, and retinyl acetate) have been linked to an increased chance for birth defects.
- **B Vitamins**
 - There are eight B vitamins:

- Vitamin B₁ / thiamine: DRI: 1.4 mg
 - Vitamin B₂ / riboflavin: DRI: 1.4 mg
 - Vitamin B₃ / niacin: DRI: 18 mg
 - Vitamin B₅ / pantothenic acid: 6 mg
 - Vitamin B₆ / pyridoxine: DRI 1.9 mg
 - Vitamin B₇ / biotin: DRI: 30 mcg
 - Vitamin B₉ / folic acid (already mentioned above)
 - Vitamin B₁₂ / cobalamin: DRI: 2.6 mcg
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- These are a group of water-soluble vitamins, which means that your body will not store them. Therefore, it would be unlikely to reach a toxic level in the body. If you and your healthcare provider feel that you are unable to meet your DRI of the B vitamins through diet, then you should look for a prenatal vitamin that includes them. All prenatal vitamins should include at least folic acid (Vitamin B₉), which I mentioned earlier as an essential vitamin for pregnancy.
 - **DHA/ Omega-3 Fatty Acids:** There is no clearly defined DRI, but in 2000 it was suggested that pregnant women should aim for 300 mg/day. The best way to get these is to include fish in your diet. MotherToBaby has a blog on [eating fish in pregnancy](#). The FDA also has a guide on which fish are the best options to eat in pregnancy by breaking the fish into categories of Best Choices, Good Choices, and Choices to Avoid. The guide can be found [here](#). However, if you do not get enough in your diet, your healthcare provider might suggest including a supplement for DHA during your pregnancy.
 - **Vitamin E:** DRI: 15 mg. UL: 1,000 mg.
 - **Vitamin C:** DRI: 85 mg. UL: 2,000 mg
 - **Zinc:** DRI. 11 mg. UL: 40 mg.

It is recommended to start taking prenatal vitamins before you try to become pregnant; at a minimum, take folic acid daily. If you are already pregnant, start as soon as you learn about your pregnancy.

Again, if you have a medical condition (including but not limited to diabetes, celiac disease, eating disorders, substance misuse, malabsorption, irritable bowel, inflammable bowel, or history of bariatric surgery), talk with your healthcare providers about your specific nutritional needs.

Now that you are an expert in reading your prenatal vitamin label, you can tackle (with the advice of your health provider) selecting the one that is best for you. MotherToBaby is always available to answer questions about all exposures during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Pregnancy will bring wonder-filled moments for you and your family. MotherToBaby is here to help you and your healthcare providers to make it as stress-free as possible with up-to-date information on medications and more.

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Questions? Call 866.626.6847 | Text 855.999.3525 | Email or Chat at MotherToBaby.org.

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