

Is asthma related to diet?

In many cases, asthma is related to a family tendency towards allergy. Avoiding the development of food allergies may help to delay the onset of asthma.

A simple way to avoid the development of food allergies is to breastfeed your baby for at least 6 months or to use special formulas if breastfeeding is not possible.

There are also certain nutrients that may help to reduce the likelihood of allergies developing (see section on *omega-3 fatty acids*).

Should certain foods be avoided during pregnancy?

Many women avoid eating foods that may cause allergy during pregnancy. It makes good sense to avoid foods that you know will cause you to have an allergic reaction but pregnancy does not mean you have to stop eating all allergy-causing foods.

Avoiding all allergy-causing foods (eg eggs or dairy products) will not make your baby less likely to develop allergic diseases like asthma.

Does breastfeeding prevent asthma?

A newborn baby's immune system is still immature. Breast milk provides some protection against infection as well as helping the baby's own immune system and lungs to grow and mature.

Breastfeeding alone does not prevent asthma but it may lessen the likelihood of your baby developing allergic diseases or delay when this happens.

Even if the mother has asthma or allergies, breastfeeding is still best for the baby. Of course you should still avoid any foods that cause you to have an allergic reaction.

What if I am unable to breastfeed?

Although breastfeeding is generally best for babies, babies can also do well if they need to be bottle fed. Modern infant formulas are made to be as close to breast milk as possible, although not all the substances in breast milk can be reproduced.

Special formulas have been developed for babies who are more likely to develop allergies. These are called *hydrolysed formulas*.

Hydrolysed formulas are much the same as usual infant formulas but the protein they contain has been broken down to smaller molecules that are less likely to cause allergies. Hydrolysed formulas are available from pharmacies. Some are only available on prescription.

In the past, soya or goat's milk formulas were used for babies with an allergy to cow's milk. These have not been shown to reduce the risk of the baby developing allergies and are generally not recommended for babies with allergies.

What are omega-3 fatty acids?

Omega-3 fatty acids are one of the many nutrients that a baby gets from its mother during pregnancy and breastfeeding. As well as being important for the development of the baby's brain, these fatty acids may help to protect against inflammation in the airways.

A mother can help to make sure that her baby gets a good supply of omega-3 fatty acids by eating a diet rich in these fatty acids, and/or taking a supplement, during pregnancy.

Natural sources of omega-3 fatty acids include flaxseed oil and fish (especially oily fish such as mackerel and sardines).

If your baby is born prematurely or is not being breastfed, talk to your doctor about supplementing with omega-3 fatty acids.

What are probiotics?

A healthy human gut contains millions of bacteria that are necessary for healthy digestion. These good bacteria seem to help the immune system to function normally. Probiotics are live cultures of the good bacteria. One type of bacteria, *Lactobacillus*, may even help to prevent food allergies.

Taking *Lactobacillus* during pregnancy, either in some types of yoghurt, probiotic drinks and/or as supplements, may reduce the baby's risk of developing childhood eczema (another allergic disease).

While we are unsure about whether they also help to prevent the development of childhood asthma, probiotics are certainly good for the mother's health.

Breastfed infants have high concentrations of protective *Lactobacillus* in their guts but formula-fed babies tend to have higher levels of bad bacteria. If your baby is not being breastfed, talk to the doctor about supplementing with *Lactobacillus*.

When should other foods be introduced?

It is quite safe to give your baby only breast milk or formula for the first six months.

When you do introduce other foods, start by offering foods that are unlikely to cause allergy (eg baby rice cereal). Later you can introduce vegetables and fruits, then meats. Only one food should be added at a time, with ideally 5 to 10 days before a new food is introduced.

If there is a history of allergy or asthma in your family, it may be a good idea to wait until the baby is 12 months old before introducing cow's milk and other dairy products, soy products, eggs, nut spreads (eg peanut butter) and fish.

Talk to your doctor or dietician about a plan for introducing foods to your baby.

What is asthma?

Asthma is a reversible narrowing of the airways in the lungs. Asthma symptoms include wheezing, coughing (particularly at night), chest tightness, difficulty in breathing and shortness of breath.

Asthma is a manageable health condition. Although at present there is no cure, with good management, people with asthma can lead normal, active lives.

Is my baby likely to develop asthma?

Asthma is common among Australian children. Some babies are more likely to develop asthma. The reasons behind this are still not clear but we do know that the development of asthma may be more likely if:

- there is a family history of asthma.
- the mother smokes during pregnancy or the baby is exposed to passive smoke.

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