

Decoding one-a-days

Your guide to prenatal supplements, from vitamin A to zinc.

BY JANE WOLKOWICZ

If you are expecting, your healthcare provider has likely already stressed how important it is to take prenatal vitamins throughout your pregnancy. But reading labels at your local pharmacy is kind of like trying to understand a foreign language: You've heard of niacin, but what exactly is biotin? And how much do you really need?

Luckily, choosing the right prenatal for you doesn't have to be so confusing. We're here to translate the terminology and make it easy to narrow down the most important components to look for when navigating the supplement aisle.

Why do I need prenatal vitamins?

Now that you're eating for two, you've probably upped your intake of healthy fruits, vegetables and protein. But even if you consume a balanced diet most of the time, you still have an increased need

for certain nutrients during pregnancy, notes Natalia Stasenko, MS, RD, CDN, founder of Tribeca Nutrition in New York City. That's where prenatal vitamins can help. "Although food should be a primary source of nutrition, prenatal supplements can be used to fill in gaps in your diet and increase your chances for having the healthiest baby possible," she says.

Typically, the main difference between a prenatal vitamin and the chewable variety you took as a kid is a higher amount of folic acid and iron. These are two essential nutrients women need both before and throughout pregnancy. Without enough iron, for example, women put themselves at risk for delivering preterm and at a low birth weight. Getting plenty of folic acid both before and early on in the first trimester is crucial for the development of DNA and helps to prevent birth defects, including spina bifida. >>



tip:

You should begin taking prenatal vitamins at least one month before you plan to conceive to lower baby's chances of serious birth defects by 50 to 70 percent, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

A PRENATAL GLOSSARY

Make sure you check for the following essential vitamins and nutrients on your prenatal label:

<p>VITAMIN A: Supports baby's lung development; helps other organs function properly.</p>	<p>VITAMIN E: Serves as an antioxidant and is important in the formation of red blood cells.</p>	<p>VITAMIN B6: May reduce nausea and vomiting for mom; involved in brain development and immune function for baby.</p>	<p>IRON: Helps both mom's and baby's muscles develop; prevents anemia; lowers the risk of preterm delivery and delivery at a low birth weight.</p>
<p><i>The FDA recommends pregnant women get vitamin A from beta-carotene, which is considered nontoxic. Your supplement should contain fewer than 5,000 international units (IU).</i></p>	<p>VITAMIN B1 (thiamine): Essential for baby's brain development; aids in the functioning of mom's nervous system and heart.</p>	<p>VITAMIN B12: Required for proper red blood cell formation, neurological function and DNA synthesis.</p>	<p>ZINC: Needed to make proteins and DNA; helps mom's immune system fight off invading bacteria and viruses.</p>
<p>VITAMIN C: Protects cells and keeps them healthy.</p>	<p>VITAMIN B2 (riboflavin): Important for growth and red blood cell production; helps mom's nervous system function properly.</p>	<p>FOLIC ACID: Reduces the risk of neural tube defects such as spina bifida.</p>	<p><i>good to know ...</i></p> <p>Other ingredients, including biotin (vitamin H) and selenium, are commonly included in prenatal vitamins and are generally considered safe.</p>
<p>VITAMIN D: Regulates the amount of calcium and phosphorous in the body; keeps baby's bones and teeth healthy.</p>	<p>VITAMIN B3 (niacin): Contributes to baby's brain development.</p>	<p>CALCIUM: Intended to supplement your diet and support bone growth.</p>	

Might be labeled as ferrous fumarate.

What about DHA?

Getting enough DHA (at least 300 milligrams) is essential for baby's brain development and supports the functioning of the nervous system. If DHA is not already included in your prenatal vitamin, ask your doctor about taking an additional supplement.

Which kind is right for me?

In addition to folic acid and iron, prenatal vitamins should contain calcium, which is important for bone and red blood cell development, as well as adequate amounts of vitamins A, the B-complex, C, D and zinc—all of which are essential for baby's growth.

Beyond containing the basic nutrients listed above, a woman's insurance coverage, personal preference and budget often come into play when choosing one brand over another, notes Alyssa Dweck, MD, an OB/GYN and healthy mama brand medical advisory board member.

Although over-the-counter prenatsals are not a major expense, specialty and prescription brands can be pricey. Check with your insurance provider to see which brands are covered as part of your plan.

Other considerations when choosing one kind over another might include the percentage of the daily value for all of the nutrients listed (it shouldn't exceed 100 percent), whether the bottle contains a U.S. Pharmacopeia (USP) label (which ensures the product has been tested for safety and quality), whether the vitamins contain herbs and other botanicals (which increase costs but have not necessarily been tested for safety or efficacy during pregnancy)

Ease up

Many women experience an upset stomach or headache when taking prenatal vitamins. Follow these tips to mitigate those side effects:

- 1 Never take more than the recommended dose.
- 2 Do not break, chew or crush the capsule; take the whole pill.
- 3 Drink a full glass of water.
- 4 Store the vitamins in their original containers at room temperature.
- 5 Take your dose at bedtime, when your stomach is full and you're about to fall asleep for the night.

THE RIGHT STUFF

When perusing the vitamin aisle, check labels, and look for the following amounts of essential vitamins and nutrients.*

Folic acid	400 to 800 micrograms
Calcium	250 milligrams
Iron	30 milligrams
Vitamin C	50 milligrams
Zinc	15 milligrams
Copper	2 milligrams
Vitamin B6	2 milligrams
Vitamin D	400 international units

*Recommendations are approximate; check with your healthcare provider as your needs may differ.

Source: MayoClinic.org

and whether the iron is labeled as slow-releasing (which helps with digestion but might not be absorbed as efficiently).

Stasenکو also notes that it's wise to check labels for the provided daily value of calcium, as most brands only contain around 15 percent. It's important for women who don't get a lot of calcium in their diet to take prenatal vitamins with 100 percent of the daily value or take an additional calcium supplement. As always, she stresses, be sure to talk to your doctor before considering any add-ons. **P&N**

A+ choices

A few prenatal vitamins and supplements worth considering.



Includes signature Ferr-Ease system for dual-iron delivery.

CitraNatal prenatal vitamin and DHA supplement, by prescription only, citr natal.com



Goes easy on the stomach.

VitaFusion gummy prenatal vitamin with DHA, \$12, drugstore.com



Can't swallow pills? Drink your nutrients instead.

Premama Complete prenatal drink mix with DHA, \$30, target.com



Sip and swallow to support those bones.

Florahealth calcium liquid supplement, \$26, vitaminshoppe.com



All natural ingredients, complete nutrition.

Rainbow Light prenatal vitamin system, \$15, rainbowlight.com



Don't forget about DHA!

healthy mama brand prenatal vitamin and DHA supplement, \$33, healthymamabrand.com



Petite soft-gels go down easily.

VitaMedMD prenatal vitamin with DHA, by prescription only, vitamedmdrx.com